



Just
KIN

CARYL
McADOO

A Texas Romance

Book Six, 1861-1865

Praying my story gives God
glory!

Five-Star reviews of Just Kin...

I have followed this historical romance series from the beginning, and they just keep getting better. Lacey Rose loves Charley and is devastated when he leaves to fight for Texas with the Confederate army. Charley doesn't realize Lacey Rose is in love with him but is both surprised and pleased with the goodbye kiss she gives him. After Charley sends a hurtful letter trying to discourage her from waiting for him, Lacey Rose runs away and ends up in all kinds of trouble. Charley also stirs up some trouble of his own when he begins looking for her. Don't miss out on this book. I loved it!

--Louise Koiner, Texas beta reader

Caryl McAdoo has done it again! This Christian historical romance, "Just Kin", is a page turner that I couldn't put down until I finished. Its message, "Love covers a multitude of sin" is so very true! A stolen kiss, torn apart by war, rejection, and a letter with news she never wanted shreds Lacey Rose's heart causing her to run away. Charley figures out something isn't right, but he is duty-bound to the Confederacy until a deathbed order sets in motion events that tests his love, honor, and commitment.

I loved this series. I laughed at "the boys". I felt the hurt of Lacey Rose and the anxiety of the family. And then who is Mr. Dithers? A must read. It is full of so many surprises. I recommend this book and this author. Can the two lifelong friends see past their pain and realize God's plan for them may be more than just kin? --Joy Gibson, Tennessee beta reader

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Historical Christian Texas Romances

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<i>Hope Reborn</i>	- 1850-1851
<i>Sins of the Mothers</i>	- 1851-1853
<i>Daughters of the Heart</i>	- 1853-1854
<i>Just Kin</i>	- 1861-1865

Contemporary Christian Red River Romances

The Preacher's Faith *Sing a New Song*

One and Done

Apple Orchard Romances - *Lady Luck's a Loser*

Biblical fiction, The Generations

A Little Lower Than the Angels

Then the Deluge Comes

Replenish the Earth

Children of Eber

Mid-Grade, River Bottom Ranch Stories

The Adventures of Sergeant Socks: The Journey Home, bk 1

(re-release coming soon in digital) *The Bravest Heart*, bk 2

Amazing Graci, *Guardian of the River Bottom Goats*, bk 3

Days of Dread Trilogy - *The King's Highway*, bk 1

Miscellaneous Novels

The Thief of Dreams > **Warning: not written for Christians!**

The Price Paid *Absolute Pi* (audio)

Apple Orchard B&B (now Lady Luck's a Loser)

Non-fiction

Great Firehouse Cooks of Texas

Antiquing in North Texas

Story & Style, The Craft of Writing Creative Fiction

Texas Romance Characters in this story (fuller profiles after 'The End') alphabetically...

~ **Baylor, LEVI Bartholomew** – born November 2, 1817 orphaned at age five; reared by Aunt Sue until fourteen, then Uncle Henry Buckmeyer, too, after he married her. Became husband to Rosaleen 'Sassy' or 'Rose' Fogelsong Nightingale Baylor and step-father to Charley Nightingale and Bart Baylor (Comanche Chief Bold Eagle's

son).

~ **Baylor, Rosaleen 'ROSE' (SASSY) Summer Fogelsong Nightingale** – born August 24, 1823, married at fifteen in the fall of '38 to Charles Nightingale, then stolen by the Comanche in the summer of '39. She lived with the tribe five years as the captive third wife of the chief, birthing Nightingale's son Charley in February, 1840, until being rescued in October of 1844 by the Texas Rangers. She married Levi in mid-December of that same year and gave birth to Bartholomew, the Comanche chief's blood son in 1845.

~ **Baylor, Bartholomew 'BART'** – born July 20, 1845 to Rose and Levi, but blood son of Comanche chief Bold Eagle

~ **Buckmeyer, David Crockett** – born October 4, 1851 firstborn of Henry and May.

~ **Buckmeyer, Patrick HENRY** - born March 6, 1798; married Susannah 'Sue' Baylor in 1832, and became a widower in Dec '44 at his son Houston's birth. Finding love again, he married May Meriwether in 1850 and fathered Crockett and Charlotte.

~ **Buckmeyer, Meri 'Charlotte'** born in 1854 to Henry and May.

~ **Buckmeyer, Sam HOUSTON** – born December 11, 1844. Henry and Sue's fifth child, first son. His mother passed at his birth, so was motherless until he was six years old.

~ **Dempsey, Frederica 'FREDDIE'** May's publisher who Charley turns to for help in New York City on his search for Lacey Rose. She has a widowed daughter, Marah O'Connor

~ **Jeffcoat, CLAUDIA**, a wealthy married woman and avid reader of dime romances who befriended and helped Charley on his search for Lacey Rose. Pauleen Shriver's sister.

~ **Meriwether, JEWEL (formerly Mammy) Rozier** the Buckmeyers' cook after Henry rescued her and her son Jean Paul Rozier who also works for the Buckmeyers.

~ **Meriwether, Millicent MAY** born August 23, 1808 married Henry Buckmeyer in 1850 and gave birth to David Crockett in 1851 and Charlotte in 1854.

~ **Nightingale, Charles 'CHARLEY' Nathaniel** - born son to a

Comanche chief Feb 27 '40 to the captive third wife, but Charles Nightingale was his blood father. Rescued in 1844 with his mother by Texas Rangers Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk. He killed a man at ten when Comancheros came to steal him and his mother to return them to Bold Eagle.

~ **Nightingale, LACEY Rose Langley** born November 16, 1844 in Nacogdoches to Laura, only fourteen when Lacey's father, a Comanche brave, had captured her.

~ O'Connor, Curry CYLE, Junior Marah' fourteen year old son
Mention in: JUST KIN

~ O'Connor, CURRY Cyle, Senior Marah's dead husband
Mention in: JUST KIN

~ **O'Connor, MARAH** A beautiful older woman (to Charley) who falls in love. She breeds thoroughbreds and is the daughter of Freddie – May's publisher who helped Charley in New York

~ **Rozier, JOHN PAUL** son of the Buckmeyer's cook, Mammy—or later, Jewel. He and his mother were freed by their former owner when he died and both went to work for Henry; him supervising the cotton fields. He married Laura Langley, another soul Henry took in.

~ **Rozier, LAURA Langley** was rescued at fifteen in 1844 along with Sassy. Pregnant at the time, she delivered the next month—a baby girl, Lacey Rose on the trace. She stays on at the Buckmeyers first as wet nurse, then later as teacher. Marries Jean Paul Rozier.

~ **Rusk, REBECCA Ruth Baylor** – born June 12, 1823; Sue's daughter with 1st husband Andrew (died before Rebecca's birth). Marries Wallace Rusk at age twenty-seven in 1850. No children.

~ **Rusk, WALLACE** – born August 15, 1819, a sixteen-year-old orphan picked up by Henry Buckmeyer and young Levi Baylor on the way to the Battle of San Jacinto, served with Levi Texas Rangering, fell in love with his sister Rebecca sight-unseen, finally met her in '44, and after wearing her down, married her in 1850. Lacey Rose Langley Nightingale was named after him.

~ **Shriver, PAULEEN** a Wealthy married woman and avid reader of dime romances who befriended Charley on his search for Lacey Rose
Mention in: JUST KIN

Just *K*IN



CARYL McADOO

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, places, characters, and events are products of the author's imaginations, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

It isn't only Yourgrace that's amazing! The sound is as sweet of Your faithfulness, too. You never slumber or sleep; You've promised my soul to keep, and when I get in too deep, Your love always lifts me. Amazing! You're so amazing! Everything about You, everything that You do: the stars in the sky, a baby's first cry, the newness of Spring, and the joy that it brings! You're so amazing, Lord! You're amazing to me! (lyrics of a new song He gave me) I love You, Father God!

I am my beloved's, and he is mine! I love you Ron, my husband and best friend, more today than yesterday, but less than tomorrow. For forty-nine years I've loved our 24/7 togetherness and so appreciate your love and presence.

I dedicate this book to my sisters. As an only child, my cousins became my first 'sisters': Jimmie Lynn Pumphrey, Mary Jo Bassford, and Paula Ruth Bates. Mary was my favorite, only six weeks older than me; JL, the oldest thought she was the boss of me, and Paula was a tag-a-long until we all grew up. I love y'all so much!

Seven years old when she was born, I've loved my only blood-sisser Cathy Lynn Lawrence Barnett since January, 1958. Carol Jane McAdoo became my sister in 1968 when I married Ron. Yes, there are two Carol McAdoos! Ron and his brother Bruce both married one. I love you, Cathy and Carol!

In 1975, God sent that special one, the sister-of-my heart, Elaine Vincent, and we've been through it all with each other for forty-plus years—side by side and heart to heart! When my brother married, I was blessed with Gayla Gwen Lawrence as a sister, a lovely lady. loveLoveLOVE, you two, too!

God's given me so many beloved sisters in the body of Christ, I can't begin to name all, but you know who you are, Sandy, Holly, Margaret, Louise, Patricia, Sherry, Shannan, Lenda, Naomi, Becky, Berta, Bennie, Carolyn, Holly, Cass, Carrie, Anita, Judy, Lisa, Joyce, Donna, Teresa, Mary, and oh so many more. I love all you dear ladies and dedicate this story to you.

Acknowledgements

How can I say thank You enough to my Father Who blesses me so and helps me endlessly? You are glorious, full of splendor, and all Your works

declare Your majesty! You are glorious, perfect in holiness, and it's amazing that You've chosen me! That You love me, You sing over me...that Your thoughts turn to my day. Lord, You are glorious, and I exalt You. I'll always worship You and lift my voice in praise! (lyrics of a new song He gave me)

The most Christ-like man I've ever known is my Ron, my husband who continues to love me no matter what. He supports, encourages, protects, advises, leads, provides for, brags on, reels me in when I need it, and cares for me. Oh yes, and he is a great cook, too. And an awesome writer as well.

Each time my new release is a Texas Romance, I owe a big word of thanks to Kirk DouPonce of Dog Eared Design for creating my beautiful covers. They are all so exquisite. I thank God for you, Kirk!

My Christian eVALUaters are priceless to me as the early readers, sometimes editors, and reviewers. They support me online sharing my book news and say the sweetest things about my stories!☐ Hugs and blessings, y'all.

My proofreader has become my sister-friend, too. Lenda Selph blesses my spirit continually, and I've kept her plenty busy this year! And Louise Koiner and Cassandra Wessel are such wonderful catchers, too! Thank you, dear ones!

And readers! Thank you for buying my novels, for leaving reviews, for clicking 'Share' and 'Like' on Facebook, for tweeting, and recommending my stories to your friends. Where would I be without you? I pray for God's blessing and favor to flow over you. Y'all are all blessings to me!

My cup overflows!

Chapter One



May 18, 1861

“Just one more.”

A chorus of disappointed ‘AWWs’ followed. The deeper throated ones outnumbered the rest, but did nothing to deter her. “Oh, it doesn’t hurt! Now come on. Please. This time with the whole family.”

Lacey Rose slipped away to the porch and sat on a step. Aunt May hurried about putting everyone exactly where she wanted them. The photographer hovered, offering his advice, but no one else paid much attention.

“Lacey, come stand here by your mama.”

Nothing in her wanted to. She really wasn’t a part of the family, but it wouldn’t do to argue, not with the mistress of the house. The only one who could persuade that woman on anything was Uncle Henry.

But still, she didn’t look like the rest and had no blood relation. Her mother could pass for a family member, but Lacey favored her father, Bear Fang.

The few minutes seemed more like an hour. Then finally, it was over.

Except really, just beginning.

How could some tall buffoon from Illinois get himself elected president of the United States and start such a terrible war? She didn’t want them to leave. Things would never be the same once they did.

Tears flowed aplenty. Kisses and hugs, too, but she couldn’t do a thing about it. Only watch. She choked back a sob. How could he leave?

Yet, there he stood. His fancy uniform sure looked dashing on her love. Every last one of them hated slavery, so why were they going off to defend Texas as Confederate soldiers?

She didn’t understand.

Kissing the last cheek, practically ignoring her, he strode toward the wagon assigned to him. She couldn’t stand it. He was leaving, and she might never...ever....

The last porch step offered something to kick against, and in doing

so, she propelled herself off and raced to him. He turned, and she threw herself into his arms. Blatant as the afternoon sun, she pressed her lips against his. At first, he only stood stone still, then kissed her back.

Her heart stopped. She'd passed on to Heaven.

But then it boomed again, pulsing blood through her veins.

Never had she been so alive.

Firm hands grasped her shoulders, and he pushed her back, peered into her eyes.

"I love you, Charley Nightingale. I've loved you forever, and I always will." She hugged him tight, and he let her. She spoke softly into his ear. "I do, I love you. Promise you'll come back to me. Please! Do not get yourself killed. I don't want to live my life without you. Promise you'll come home." She leaned back a bit.

Nodding, he searched her eyes then put his lips on hers.

"Lacey Rose!"

Charley leaned out and smiled. "You best go on. We've got to leave, but I do promise you. I won't get killed."

As much as she hated to, she retreated.

Standing in the yard in front of the big house, her insides as thrilled as they were devastated, she watched the wagons roll along until the last glimpse.

Her tears exceeded their boundaries. She fell to her knees then to the ground and sobbed, sitting there in the dirt. She loved him with a love deeper and truer than any that had ever been.

And he was gone.

Why hadn't she told him before?

A hand gripped her arm. "Get yourself inside." She looked up and sniffled. Her mother glared, her eyes spit fire.

Instead of screaming no, Lacey nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Dust yourself off. Let me see if you've ruined that dress."

"Oh, Ma, please. A little dirt isn't going to hurt nothing."

Her mother dragged her to the modest saw-board house Jean Paul had built for the two of them, even though all Lacey Rose wanted to do was run into the big house and upstairs to her room where she could cry until Charley came home.

The door closed, and her mother turned on her.

"What in the world did you think you were doing, young lady? Except I can't imagine that definition befits you right now! Have you and Charley Nightingale been slipping around behind our backs?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then why were you two carrying on so?" Her eyes hadn't cooled one bit. "If your grandpa were alive, he'd of skinned your hide, and mine, too, for allowing my daughter to act like a sporting lady! And

right in front of God and everybody! Haven't I told you? I never taught you to act like that! You have embarrassed me to the quick. I am so ashamed!"

"Mother! All I did was kiss him goodbye. I've loved that man since I can remember and he's going off to war! He might die, for Heaven's sake!"

"Don't you swear, Lacey Rose! And Charley Nightingale is no man, he's only a boy."

"Ma...my heart...it's broken. Do you have to...." She sniffed then wiped her cheeks. Her mother was wrong! Charley was a man, a good one, the best. Lacey had done nothing to warrant the way her mother acted. She swallowed and looked her in the eye, returning her hateful stare.

She would not look away or repent!

She hadn't done anything wrong.

"You can bet your drawers I have to! Why, I have never seen the likes! You threw yourself at him! For land's sake, girl, everyone saw it. They were all gawking at you two! How can I ever face Henry Buckmeyer and May again? Or Wallace and Rebecca? Levi and Rose, too, for that matter."

"Oh, Mother, please."

"What? I'll never hear the end of it! They'll probably fire me. Who'd want to pay good money for a teacher whose own daughter acts like a trollop? No telling what they're all going to think."

Balling her fist, Lacey quickly contemplated the repercussions. She hadn't thought past her love for the man who may die in war. But what did anything matter above that?

Her mother stood there as though waiting for a response. "I swear on a stack of Bibles, Lacey Rose Langley, if we have to move over this, I'll —"

"Oh, Ma. Papa is running things now that Uncle Henry is gone. No one is going to throw us out just because I love Charley."

"Except Jean Paul is not. May and Chester are in charge, and if she says we're out, then what? We don't have nothing. Nowhere to go." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "And all because you can't control yourself enough to act like the lady I taught you to be."

Lacey Rose knew better than to argue with her mother, especially when she acted like an idiot. She worried all the time over what the Buckmeyers thought. So idiotic. They were all nice folks, kind to the bone.

No one would be throwing them out or doing anything over one little kiss. Well, actually two, but....

Then her mother sat on the edge of the bed and covered her face with her hands. "It's the Comanche in you, isn't it? That's what it is! I

hate those no good, dirty....”

Her cheeks flushed. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I’ve known for years. Bart told me about you trying to get him to run off with you back when you were only nine years old.”

How could he? Her breath came hard. “What of it?”

“You are so ungrateful! The most ungrateful child ever walked on this earth, you...you little....”

“What? What am I, Ma?”

The hate in her eyes pushed Lacey back. She’d never seen her mother in such a state. “A half-breed! That’s what! And you’re acting just like one of those ungrateful savages.”

What? Well, there it was.

In all her sixteen years, her mother had never called her that. Fresh tears welled again, but that time she blinked them away.

Though she wanted to scream, she nodded instead, turned, and walked out. Once the door closed, she ran to the stairs then took them two at a time, like she had as a child, all the way to her room.

She’d show her! She’d show all of them.



Though much like herding cats, May finally got the children’s feet under the kitchen table, sugar cookies passed out, and left them under Jewel’s watchful eye. May smiled at Rose and nodded toward the library, then offered the same wordless invitation to Rebecca.

While the younger ladies sat comfortably in the two wingbacks, she pressed into her husband’s chair.

Oh, it fit her so well.

“Well, I’m sure you know why we’re here. Has Charley said anything to you, Rose?”

“No, ma’am. Not a word, but then he’s always been tight-lipped, especially when it comes to matters of the heart. I didn’t even know he’d been courting that Lattimore girl until her mama said something at church about him not coming around anymore.”

Rebecca leaned out and faced Rose. “When was this? Why didn’t anyone tell me? You’re talking about Olive Lattimore, aren’t you? She’s a very nice young lady. Charley could do way worse.”

“That’s what I told him, but by the time I found out, for all practical purposes, the deal was done—over. He said she wasn’t the girl for him in that I’m-a-grown-man-and-don’t-need-you-in-my-business tone I just hate.”

“He’s grown up so fast.”

“I know. I think Levi may have had something to do with his decision. At least I’m pretty sure he agreed with it.”

If May let them go on, who knew how long they'd talk about Charley and Olive? She had serious, more pressing matters to take into hand.

"Excuse me, ladies. I'd like to get back to Lacey." She faced the redhead she loved like a little sister. "So, has Charley said anything at all about her?"

"Not a word to me."

"Nor I."

"I wouldn't want either of you to break any confidences, but have your husbands...?"

May nodded then looped her head into a no, but only got shrugs for a response. "I know I'm grasping at straws, but this is important, and it's left to me. Only the Lord knows when we'll see our menfolk again."

"I was almost as shocked that Charley kissed her back. I mean, at first, he just stood there ram rod straight, then...oh..." Rose fanned herself. "Levi used to kiss me that way."

Glancing from her to her friend, Rebecca smiled. "Wallace still does. Well, when he's of a mind, but that's...."

Both blushed, but kept up their comparisons. May closed her eyes and leaned back, remembering a special time of her own. Henry's first kiss....

"Mama?"

Oh, she would love to have stayed longer with her beloved, but opened her eyes. "Yes! I apologize. I'd like a word with Lacey and Laura now. Either of you care to volunteer to fetch them?"

Rose jumped to her feet. "I'll get them."

"No, wait." Rebecca rose. "You should probably stay...if it's okay."

They both looked to May, and she gave them a nod. "Certainly."

"Let me go then, and I'll take the children out from under Jewel's feet. Read them a story or two. Here, you sit in my chair. That'll leave the extra straight-back for Lacey. Anything else I should tend to, Mama?"

"No, nothing just now, darling."

"Thank you, my friend. I owe you." Rose sat down again.

Not soon enough, the door swung open.

Poor Lacey looked like a trapped, wide-eyed kitten, albeit beat down. Laura walked past her daughter and sat in the wingback opposite from Rose. She didn't appear in such good shape herself.

"Sweetheart, would you pull that chair over and sit it there next to your mother?"

"Yes, ma'am." The girl's red face and swollen eyes clearly bore witness of her broken heart. She complied getting it, sat it next to Laura, but remained standing, gripping the back's top slat until her

knuckles turned white. “Miss May, I love him. I’ve always loved him for as long as I can remember.”

The girl faced the lady she apparently wanted to be her mother-in-law. “He was leaving, and I had to let him know.”

Laura jumped to her feet and turned on the girl. “Now hush your mouth, Lacey Rose. Sit yourself down, and allow Miss May to tell us what for.”

Never had May heard Laura talk so rough to any child. She’d always been so patient.

“Yes, please, dear. Do sit. I...uh...we, that’s Rose and I, we’re wondering...” She smiled at the girl who barely squatted on the chair’s edge, looking like she might bolt any second. “Well, you and Charley. I’d like to find out more about this...this... Is there anything we need to know, dear?”

“Like what? I just said that we love each other. What else are you talking about?”

Clearing her throat, Rose nodded and scooted to the edge of her chair, too. But instead of bolting, the redhead appeared as if she wanted to shake the girl.

“In fact, that isn’t what you said, sweetheart. Earlier you said you loved him. Now you’re saying we love each other. Have the two of you spoken before? Has Charley told you that he loves you?”



Lacey’s heart boomed. She wanted to fly out the door, but instead, smiled at Charley’s mother. “Wasn’t it evident?”

“I would appreciate straight answers, Lacey, please.” Miss May’s tone remained calm and as sweet as could be. “We need to know exactly what has transpired. Miss Rose asked if the two of you have ever spoken of a relationship. If so, then how long has this been going on? And has he done anything inappropriate?”

Were they all blind? “Yes, of course. Didn’t you see? He kissed me back. He does love me. I know he does now, and I love him. And he promised –”

“Promised what, young lady?” If her mother’s eyes spit the fire in them, Lacey would be covered in burns. She must hate her. How could a mother hate a daughter?

Oh yes, she remembered. Because she was a half-breed, and her mother hated all Indians.

Without a glance in her direction, she spoke in a stilted manner. “He’s. Coming. Back. For me. That’s what.”

Miss May put her hands on the desk and leaned forward. The woman’s face remained pleasant enough, but she glared almost as

much as Ma.

“We all saw the kiss, Lacey. Now I’m going to ask you one more time, and I expect a specific answer. Before today, has anything happened between the two of you?”

Her cheeks burned. Wait, wait. What were they all thinking? Her mouth went dry and she wanted to die. If only the floor would open and swallow her up.

Finally, she worked up a single swallow.

So.

They all thought... That’s what this was all about. Any second, one of them would call her a half-breed, too. That’s the real truth of this inquisition. She wasn’t good enough for Levi and Wallace’s littlest partner.

Jumping to her feet, she placed her fists on her hips and spit some fire of her own. “I hate you all.”

Slowly, she turned, glaring, daring each of them in succession, but to the woman, they just sat there silent as a board and stared back at her.

They thought she was a whore, that she’d done something horrible. It shone right in their eyes, all of them.

Of their own accord, her feet propelled her to the door and out.

But where?

Where could she run?

Chapter Two



The major held the tent's flap open, and Charley marched in. He stopped short of the general's field desk, came to attention, and gave his best salute. The one he'd been practicing all week. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"At ease, Corporal."

Charley spread his feet and put his hands behind his back, but he wasn't at all at ease. Enlisted men did not get summoned to the general's tent. Leastwise, that's what all the guys said—except that particular general happened to be his Uncle Henry.

And the closest thing he had to a father and Uncle Wallace flanked him. "Yes, sir."

"We move out in the morning, but we've been discussing the situation at home."

"Yes, sir." He glanced at Levi then Wallace, but neither offered comfort or support. Instead, both appeared like they wanted to whip him...or worse. "Has something happened, sirs?"

"That's what we need to talk about."

"Yes, sir." He kept his hands behind his back, but stiffened his back again.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush, Son. Have you dishonored Lacey Rose?"

"What? No! No, sir." He looked from his uncle to his adopted father again. Did they think it, too? How could they? "I'll swear on a Bible, sir. Never. What gave you that idea?"

"Her. You. When we left, she acted like... Well, we all figured it was over you leaving...but that something else had happened to get her so upset."

"No, sir. I give you my word."

"If you say it, I believe you, Son."

"Thank you, sir. Until that moment, I never dreamed she cared for me in that way. I mean, we've been close, but she's always been like a sister. I've never touched her in any dishonorable manner, and I never would, sir. That kiss...was the first..."

"Good, we've been ordered south. I wouldn't want anything distracting you."

"Is that all, sir?"

The general looked to the colonel, who stepped forward. "How

about now, Son? How do you feel about her now?"

Charley shook his head. He'd been asking himself the same question.

"I don't know, sir. I've been thinking on it some, but just like you told me about Olive. I figure I'm still too young to even be thinking about getting married. I did promise I'd come back alive. I suspect every man in this tent said the same."



That first night after the big accusatory confab, Lacey Rose decided. She'd go to him.

If only she could be sure where they were. She'd wait. Surely one of the women would get word of the brigade's posting. Uncle Chester claimed he heard they were heading south, but didn't know more.

So, every morning, she did her chores, spoke when spoken to, and returned all smiles, but generally kept her own company.

Waiting.

Biding her time.

She meandered out to the red oak, crossed her legs, sitting on the ground, and leaned against its trunk. Even Bart and Houston had gone with them. She shook her head.

What a fight that had been, but they got their way in the end. Their mothers couldn't say much after Uncle Henry's speech.

No matter how much they hated it, they knew he was right—like he almost always was. They all agreed the best place for the boys to be was with Uncle Henry, Levi, and Wallace. Mostly to keep them from running off and joining some other army.

Men.

About every male in the valley and his brother volunteered to fight for the cause. Except Uncle Henry had gone for a different reason. The whole house heard that argument.

Still, who ever heard of a fifteen-year-old boy going off to war?

A fluffy white cloud above floated across the bluest sky. Its shape reminded her of a rearing horse with no rider.

Half-breed. Maybe her father's people were looking at the same sky and watching the same riderless, rearing stallion. She used to show Bart such, and they'd play the cloud game for hours.

Half-breed.

How could Bart have gone? Or Houston? But they had, the both of them. Dropping her head between her knees, a tear traveled down her cheek to the tip of her nose and hung there. The boys rode right out with her Charley.

A wonder Crockett didn't go, too. Not like he didn't want to, but

with him only coming ten, Miss May put her foot down flat.

Why didn't her love write her a letter?

Aimlessly, she watched the men in the far field move about like ants. If only Bonnie still lived in Texas. She'd understand. She'd support Lacey's love. Might even help.

Her best girlfriend's decision to join her sisters in California almost broke her heart, but at least Bonnie wrote regularly. Lacey filled her lungs then exhaled slowly. Sounded like working at the orphanage would be fun.

If not for Charley, she might have asked to go with her, but she couldn't leave him.

She hated being there alone.

Since she no longer had a mother she could talk to—and she seemed just fine with the arrangement, too. Probably regretted having her all along. Made her sick the way Ma twittered around Jean Paul all the time like a sparrow on a jay.

Wasn't like he was her real father.

No, she'd bide her time, gather what coins she could, then once word came, she'd light out to be with her love, wherever that might be. She could make herself useful. Cook or sew or whatever Uncle Henry needed, but at least she'd be close to Charley.

Two whole months passed without a word.

Then an oversized tan envelope showed up on the supper table right after Miss Jewel's prize-winning bread pudding.

Miss May smiled, a real for goodness grin. "Ladies, Chester fetched this in town today." She slid out a mess of smaller envelopes, and handed Rebecca the first one. She passed two to Rose then looked right at Lacey with an expression.

For a heartbeat, she went cold. He hadn't written? But why?

The woman held out an envelope toward her. No doubt she wanted to read it before letting Lacey have it. Her and one of her co-conspirators. They could make certain no nefarious plot was afoot, but she released it to her.

The others took to reading their missives right there at the table, but not her. She would wait until no prying eyes could read over her shoulder. She tucked it in her apron pocket and took to gathering dishes.

With most of the menfolk gone, the chore had fallen to her and Charlotte. The spoiled seven-year-old never did her share, but Lacey really didn't care. She liked helping after the meals instead of before. Meant less time she had to be in close proximity with the woman who'd called her a half-breed.

The little princess proved a quick learner though, and was always cheerful enough. With the last plate dried and put away, she bolted.

“Lacey, come on! We’re playing charades in the parlor.”

Games. She didn’t want to play games and didn’t bother answering. Stupid charades. Instead, she hurried to her room and locked the door, lit the oil lamp, then very carefully eased her silver letter opener along the flap.

Dear Lacey,

You kissing me that day we left, well, I’ve been thinking hard on it most every night.

She knew it! He truly loved her and surely counted the days until he could come home to her. She blinked away tears then focused again. She envied his penmanship, so even and neat, but Ma always bragged on him so. Tracing his words with a fingertip, she made believe he wasn’t at war, only on a visit.

Here’s what I’ve decided. We’re almost siblings, or at least cousins. After all, you’re named after Mama and Uncle Wallace. The men are saying this war might last ten years, and well, here it is. You best think of me as just kin, and that’s all.

Your friend,

Sergeant Charles N. Nightingale

P.S. I got promoted to Buck Sergeant after we had a dust up with some Blue Coats. And Bart and Houston say hey. Between you and me, they wish they was home.



Charlotte beat on the door with cupped hands. She liked the popping sound it made. “Lacey Rose! You know the rules! You got dishes to wash, no nevermind you didn’t eat!”

She stuck her ear to the door. Nothing. She tried the handle again, but it still was locker than locked. “Lacey! Mama says you can’t stay in your room! Open the door!” She smacked the wood again, then kicked it for good measure.

Bending, she closed her left eye and covered it with three fingers, peering through the key hole with the other. The bit of her friend she could see didn’t move.

Was she really sick?

Moving her lips to the tiny hole, she tried to whisper. “You really sick, Lacey? Want me to get Miss Jewel? Maybe you need a good dose of castor oil.”

Nothing. She only lay there as though dead. Could she be? Had she gone and died? Mama said her heart was broken.

Charlotte backed away a step.

That'd be terrible.

Who'd help her with the dishes? She couldn't do them all by herself! With her heart suddenly beating so loud she could hear it, she turned and bolted down the stairs two at a time.

Never went down so fast; shame Crockett wasn't watching. But he'd probably try three at a time and break his fool neck just like Lacey Rose told him all the time afore she passed.

Charlotte didn't stop to knock. Not with such a serious report and her father off playing general with her uncles.

The office sat quiet and empty. She ran through to the bedroom and checked.

No one in there either. So she raced to the kitchen. There was always someone in there.

"Mama! Auntie Jewel! Lacey Rose is dead!"



May jumped to her feet. "What? What are you saying, Charlotte Faye! Lacey is not dead!" She glanced over at Jewel, then to Rose. "Is she? Why are you saying such a horrible thing?"

Her baby nodded and gasped three gulps of air. "Yes, ma'am. She sure is. I beat on her door just now like you said, but she didn't come or holler for me to go away or nothing. So, I peeked through the keyhole, and she's laying there dead on her bed. Not a muscle moving. So it's true alright."

"Oh, Charlotte!"

The little girl put her fist on one hip and glared at Aunt Rose. "I saw her, Auntie. All sprawled out on the bed." She turned and face May. "I really did, Mama. I suspect that broken heart killed her."

Remembering to breathe, she willed her silly heart calm. "Listen to me, my precious. You can't do that."

"Do what? I didn't do anything, only peeked in."

"No, I mean scare me like that. She isn't dead, she's only ignoring you. Now you stay here, and get started on the dishes. I'll get my key, and Lacey will be down shortly."

Without speaking, Rose and Rebecca both offered help, but May shook them off. She wanted a moment alone with the girl. The war of silence between her and Laura must stop. Retrieving her master key, she climbed the stairs then stopped at the very room she'd spent so many lonely nights in.

Even with Charlotte, and sometimes Crockett in her bed, the nights....

Once again, they swallowed her in their darkness and choked her

with loneliness, no matter how hard she prayed. And it seemed it only got worse with each passing day.

Her Henry was gone.

She unlocked the door. "Lacey Rose, sit up. We need to talk. You cannot hide under those covers. Not from me."

The little ingrate ignored her.

May marched to the bed, grabbed the covers and flung them back. Only rolled quilts and extra pillows lay atop the sheets. She looked around the room. "Where are you hiding, young lady. Step out now." She walked to the water closet.

The chair normally in front of the dresser stood in the middle of the room.

A quick glance to the ceiling affirmed the scuttle hole's mouth gaped open. "Oh, girl, what have you done?"

Back in the room, she searched and found a note on the writing desk, right next to the letter from Charley. She read them both then hurried downstairs. She'd send Jean Paul after Lacey. She couldn't have gone far.

Though Laura wanted to, Chester went with Jean Paul, thanks to him putting his foot down. But the men came back empty-handed just before dark, claimed there was no sign of the young woman.

No one in town, nor had any of the neighbors seen her. They'd found the horse she must have left on, hobbled in the last field on the edge of their property.

Smart girl. No one could claim she stole the beast. Moving livestock around was no crime as far as May knew.

After a very somber supper, she invited Laura to the library.

"What are we going to do, Miss May? All the men who could track her are off with the army. Jean Paul promised me he'll not rest until he finds her, but if she's gone north, he's liable to get himself scalped if he crosses the Red."

"Chester said he wired word in every direction. If anyone sees her, they'll let us know. He placed a handsome reward on her safe return."

"Thank you for that. Jean Paul told me, but it's her note bothers me most." She flipped the folded page onto the desk.

"I know what it says." May took a deep breath. "That's part of why I asked you to come talk. We need to figure out what we're going to do once she's home again."

Laura wiped her cheeks then leaned back, not relaxed really, but not quite so frantic either, as though May saying a thing made it so.

Way she saw it, no need for any negativity. How many times had Henry told her? When things seemed bad—whatsoever things are lovely and pure, worthy of a good report—think on those things.

"I'm thinking, we need to love her. And not punish her for

running off.”

The woman scooted up. “Oh, yes, I’ll love on her plenty, hug her so tight, she’s likely to think I’m about to squeeze her right in two... right after I tan her hide.”

After too many words and tears, all Lacey’s mother agreed totally with was to pray over it, no matter how convincingly May assured her it would never happen again or how she’d tried to extract a promise of leniency.

Hopefully, the Lord would help her to see the wisdom in not treating the girl as a ten-year-old.

Once the door closed, she retrieved the letter and read it again.

Dear Aunt May,

I’m sorry to leave your home like this—the only one I’ve ever known, especially after you and Uncle Henry have been so gracious and kind. But as you can see from his letter, Charley doesn’t love me like I thought.

And the woman who bore me sure doesn’t. Jean Paul’s nice enough, but he isn’t my real dad. I just can’t stay anymore.

I’ll surely see Charley everywhere I look and that will only break my heart again and again. Auntie, you and Uncle Henry have always been real nice, but when your own mother hates you...has she told you she called me a half-breed? Probably not! How could she hate her own daughter so much?

It wasn’t my fault. I never asked to be born.

Well, I hate her, too! Tell the woman who was my mother that I’m going to live with my father’s people. Charlie told me once that Comanche have no word for half-breed. It’s as hard to even think of never seeing him again...as it is to ever loving her.

Apparently, I’m not worthy to be a white man’s wife, so perhaps I can find happiness with a nice Comanche brave. One who will love me, the way my father supposedly loved my mother.

Please don’t send anyone to try and find me. It will be a waste of time. Comanche squaws can vanish in the wind just like the warriors.

*Love and blessings,
Bear Fang’s daughter.*

Chapter Three



Lacey rolled the spud away from the coals and tested it with her knife. Forget that it didn't poke easily through, her belly pronounced it soft enough. She blew the first two bites cool then wolfed down the rest without salt or butter.

Shame her Uncle Wallace had boarded up the house, but at least he'd left a sack of potatoes in the root cellar. Sure dry though. She'd take them with her, maybe pick up a pinch of salt and some oil or butter along the way.

The first flash of sun peeked over the treetops. As much as she wanted to see what was inside the house that might be worth taking with her, no way could she get the boards back like they were, and someone would know she'd been there.

How many times had her honorary uncle told her anything belonged to him—if she needed it—belonged to her as well? After all, she was his namesake. So it wouldn't be like stealing.

Many a time she'd pondered on how different things might have been if only he'd have given up on Princess Rebecca and married Lacey's mama instead.

But she could take whatever she wanted.

He wouldn't care.

Still, she wanted them to think she'd gone west, not east. That was her best chance. The spuds would have to do.

Those and the hand axe she'd found in his tool shed. Sharp and ready on top of her extra clothes in her carpetbag. Pity the fool who tried to do her any harm. The knife would probably prove plenty enough, but the sight of the hatchet, too, should stop anyone in their tracks. She'd practice a little, too.

All the time in the world belonged to her.

She loved the freedom.

Mid-morning found her at a crossroads at least three miles east of English. If she had it right, she needed to go south and shadow the main road leading to DeKalb.

Before she decided for sure and certain that was the way she needed to go, the rattle of trace chains put her back into the trees' shadows.

Last thing she needed!

Being spotted still so close to home could be disastrous to her

plan. The family had surely spread the word by then. Probably even spent a day or two searching, but it'd been five nights gone by, and hopefully, they all figured her to be long gone.

Her mother was probably glad. Old biddy. Wasn't Lacey's fault who her father was.

A full-loaded logging wagon pulled by two giant jack mules rolled down the road. She recognized the beasts, and the young man in the driver's seat, too. Jed Briggs.

His older brother Jasper drove those same animals delivering timber to Uncle Henry's sawmill. He parked them in the barn a while, too, hoping to court Bonnie, except she wasn't near as interested.

Shadowing her eyes, Lacey peered at the wagon. Crazy boy was talking to himself. Looked like he carried on a two-sided conversation, too.

Purely surprised her how well Jed handled those mules, but being a year younger than her, she didn't figure he should even be out there a good five miles from his house. And going in the wrong direction, too.

Should she tell him? He was nice enough, a good boy. And she did know about that time....

Once past, she stepped from the trees' cover and jogged until even with the off-front wheel. She tossed her bag in then rode the wheel spoke up and flopped on the bench next to her friend.

"Hey, Jed. You're going the wrong direction, you know. Uncle Henry's sawmill is west of here. Get turned around?"

"Am not. Ain't going to the Buckmeyers' place. I'm taking this cypress to Phillips; him and Pa made a deal for the logs before the war broke out, and he still wants them. Some rich guy somewhere ordered them. Got to be ten inchers at the top. But, hey yourself anyway. What are you doing way out here, Lacey?"

"Oh, I had to run get something at Uncle Wallace's. So you going all the way to DeKalb, huh?" Should she chance passing anyone headed back to Clarksville?

"Maybe, but...why'd you get in my wagon heading away from home? And what have you got in the bag?" He turned and stared. "You running off?"

"Why, no! Silly you." She hated lying, but he shouldn't have asked. None of his business.

"Then what?"

"Remember that time at church when you and Bobby Ray snuck off during the covered dish dinner? Well, I followed you and I saw the two of you sinners smoking behind the hotel. You remember that, Jed?"

"What of it?"

“Point is, I didn’t tell.”

“So. Didn’t make no difference. Bobby Ray’s ma smelled it on him, then he stooled us both off. I still got strapped for it. What about it?”

Well, fine. Maybe she didn’t have that on him, but there was one thing she could give him, and it wouldn’t be like for real...him being younger...it’d only be part of a trade. “You going all the way to DeKalb by yourself or not?”

“Yes, I am. Least I was. Hey, why not? I’m coming sixteen next year. With Jasper run off to the war with Pa and the uncles, I’m the man of the house now.”

“Well? Remember how you and Bobby Ray always pestered me for a kiss?”

“Course I do. You’s never willing though, as I recall.”

“Well...I am now...if you get me to DeKalb. And you’ll have to cross your heart and hope to die not to tell anyone you ever saw me.”

“You are running off. I knew it. Where are you heading?”

“Jedidiah Briggs, hush up. Now do you want a kiss or not?”

“My lips on yours?”

“Can you keep a secret?”

He nodded. “Sure I can. I won’t tell no one.”

What a deal. It being only a trade, wouldn’t count nothing. Besides, wasn’t like Charley would care. “So, do you agree? A kiss for the ride and your silence. Is it a deal?”

“How long?”

“What do you mean how long? Forever, you’re never to tell, ever!”

“No, I mean the kiss...how long?”

“Jed, that’s just goofy. What are you thinking? You’re going to count or something? A kiss’ worth! And you have to keep your hands in your pockets, too, or it’s no deal.”

“Can I tell Bobby Ray? Please just let me tell Bobby, and you back me up.”

“Fine, but just him, and no one else. You got to swear him to privacy first though. Can he be trusted?” Ha! The dumb bunny thought she’d be back! This would be perfect. “You have to wait until Sunday next, or I can’t back you up. Not a word until then.”

He flicked the reins over the mules’ backs then grinned at her. “Is that when you’ll be back?”

“No, silly, but I am not going to church this coming Sunday if it’s any of your business. Do you want a kiss or not, Jed Briggs?”

“Who you going to see in DeKalb?”

“None of your business! Now do you want the deal, or should I just get out now? Of course, you’d have the pleasure of my company all the way as well. Won’t have to talk to yourself.”

“No, it is a good deal.” He turned sideways, put both reins in his left hand, and and stuck out his right. “I want it. I’ll take it.”

She took his oversized paw. The boy already had man-sized mitts, and she gave him a firm shake like Uncle Wallace taught her. He turned back, but kept his hand wrapped around hers. Guess it didn’t hurt to give him a sweetener.

“I don’t talk to myself, Lacey Rose.”

“I saw you, Jed.”

For the next half mile or so, the boy didn’t say a word, then he glanced over. “You’re right. I was, but, well...it’s a long way to Phillips’. I am pleased you come along.”

She liked that. Him confessing he lied. But that didn’t mean she could do likewise. The road forked, and he eased the team north.

“What are you doing? Main road’s south.”

“I know where we are. I’ve done made this trip three other times.”

“Then why are we going this way?”

“Oh, I figured you might like it better, less traffic and all. The stage racing around scares the mules some, and –”

“Why would you think I’d like it better?”

“We’re liable not to meet anyone at all going this way.”

She didn’t need to tell him anything. The immature child might want more than a kiss if he knew for sure she was running off.

“Spooking the team would be bad.”

“Yes, ma’am, and there’s a better campsite on this road.”

Campsite? He wasn’t making town before evening? How far was DeKalb anyway?

The one and only time she’d been, Jean Paul drove her and that woman of his in the buggy. She remembered it being an easy one-day trip. She glanced at the road side. “How fast you figure we’re going?”

“I keep ‘em on a two-mile-an-hour pace. Pa says pulling this much weight I’d wear the old boys down going faster. Costs me time in the long run, but they’re good mules. Ma sent some of her stew for supper.”

Food! A real honest to goodness cooked meal beat dry potatoes to the stars and back. But...other issues arose, talking about spending a night on the road. Her mother and Miss May would plum have heart attacks!

She yanked her hand from his and turned sideways, glaring. “Are you a gentleman, Jedidiah Briggs?”

His lips turned down. “You know me, Lacey. Why, I’d never take any advantage.”

“Good. That’s real good, because if you were to try anything, I’d have to hurt you, and I wouldn’t want to do that.” She hoped she sounded firm enough. “And you know I can.”

“You can sleep under the wagon, and I’ll build me a nice fire to bed down by.”

She turned back, staring ahead, but put her hand out on top of his.

With a good hour’s worth of light still left, he reined the team into a wide spot with a big pinon oak dead center. Right nice little half-acre clearing for the mules to graze. She helped him unharness the team, then grain and water the old boys.

After he hobbled them, she lent a hand gathering deadfall.

Before the last bit of light faded, his ma’s beef stew heated on the coals. She’d sent fatback, too, so Lacey added two of her potatoes and went to frying. They’d have a true supper.

Being out there alone, cooking dinner together, and setting up camp like true grownups...it was kind of fun.

He mixed cornbread and had the Dutch oven on before the pork was half done.

Her mouth watered like a bubbling spring, and her belly cried for a taste, but she didn’t want him knowing how hungry she was.

Wouldn’t be ladylike, either, to pick out of the frying pan. But she’d spied one little piece broke off...couldn’t take her eyes off it. He turned to do something, and she went for it!

Popped it in and savored its flavor. Hadn’t eaten since daybreak; and overall, so little since leaving home.

He squatted next to her. “Once I offload the timber, I could take you where you’re going.”

She squinted one eye and studied on him with the other. Was he wanting to bargain again? Or just being nice? “Aw, your ma would strap you if you were late getting home. I couldn’t be the reason you got a beating.”

He chuckled. “She don’t hit very hard, not much more than getting a bug swatted. Besides, for all she knows, I might’ve got held up unloading. Jasper used that the time we...” He closed his mouth and shrugged. “Uh...got home later than she expected.”

“What did you two do?”

“Nothing. Not a thing.”

“Why do you keep on lying to me, Jed? Don’t you think I’m smart enough to know you and your brother did something you shouldn’t if you’re getting home late and making up excuses?”

“Just you forget I said anything.”

“Well, see? That’s better than lying about it.”

“Don’t need you preaching, Lacey Rose.”

“Is that so?”

“Just that, you want me keeping your secrets, and so does he.”

She didn’t know of anywhere this side of the Red that would entice a young man to lie to his folks about visiting, but then she

probably didn't hear about half the good stuff anyway.

More than once, Houston and Bart would be giggling like little girls over something, then hush when she got close. She hated it when they did that.

"You're right, Jed." She turned and put her hand on his knee. "I do want you to keep your word and not tell Jasper's secrets—even to me—or anyone about giving me a ride either."

The silence between them hung in the air, sucking up every bit of comfortable, but before it was all lost, she added, "Isn't this sort of fun? Just the two of us? Cooking our own dinner out here in the woods?"

"Yeah, it is."

Finally, supper was ready.

Fatback and taters along with stew and cornbread never tasted so good. First real meal she had since lighting out. Shame she hadn't waited a day or two and gathered up more supplies, but then Charley shouldn't have written her that horrible letter.

She hated him, too.

"Want me to get out my juice harp?"

"Sure, when did you start playing?"

"Oh, since forever, I guess, but never had the nerve to in front of anyone until Grandma heard me practicing in the barn." He laughed. "She then took to bragging on me such. Ma and all the little ones begged me to show them. All of them claimed I weren't half bad."

She started to correct his English, but her mother did that, and she didn't want to be anything like her. "What song you going to play?"

He pulled his harmonica from his bib pocket, drew it over his mouth, then smiled. "You tell me. I ain't thought of a name yet."

"You just make up songs?"

He nodded, closed his eyes, then put the instrument to his mouth. From the first note, his music carried her away. Just like somehow, he'd seen into her heart and turned her pain and sorrow into a melody.

How had he known? For the longest she listened, then scooted closer, and leaned her head on his shoulder. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Oh, Charley!

She didn't hate him. She loved him. But why didn't he love her, too?

Why had he kissed her back?

A fly buzzed her nose. She swatted at it then rolled over and right up against a hard lump.

She sat up.

Jed Briggs slept next to her. She scooted out from under the

wagon and smoothed out her dress, looking every which direction to be sure no one had snuck up and seen her sleeping beside the boy.

But why didn't she remember falling to sleep or getting under the wagon?

"Good morning."

She backed away a step. "Thought you was going to sleep by the fire."

"I was, but I forgot I only brought one blanket. When you fell asleep on my shoulder, bawling like a new calf separated from its mama, I --"

"Did not."

"Oh, yes, you did. Cried so much you about soaked my shirt through. Missing your ma?"

Other than the salty eyes, she didn't seem any different. For a heartbeat, she replayed the night, and yes, he was right. But it wasn't her mother she wept for.

"Now, Jed Briggs, hear me good! You can't tell a single soul that we slept together, not even Bobby Ray. Do you hear?"

"We didn't sleep together! Not like we was married or something, so there's nothing to tell anyway."

"Good. Did you bring any coffee?"

"Sure thing."

"Let me make us some, and you break camp. Don't want to be lollygagging around here all day, do we?"

He grinned. "The turnoff to Phillips is only a half mile up the road."

"So? You're not wanting to stay here. Are you?"

"No, but I figured we'd get our kiss out of the way before we get going."

Chapter Four

“Go on then and see to the mules.” Lacey threw her chin toward the little meadow. “See to any necessities while you’re getting them, and don’t come back for a while...or without announcing yourself.”

“Yes, ma’am. Then we’ll...?” He raised his eyebrows. “Wouldn’t want anyone to say Lacey Rose Langley welched on a deal.”

She waved him off. “You’ll get your payment for sure and for certain. But right this minute, I need some privacy, sir.”

His lips about split his face in two. “Yes, ma’am.”

By the time he hitched the mules, she had coffee, warmed cornbread, fatback and potatoes ready for him, but didn’t see a reason to put it off any longer. “Jed, before we eat, go ahead and put your hands in your back pockets.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He complied then pulled one out and held it up, palm facing her. “Wait. Is it fine if I keep my eyes open?”

“I don’t care, but why would you want to do such a thing?”

He smirked. “Because you’re so pretty, and well, this is my first kiss—other than kin, and they don’t count—and I want to remember it.”

She figured that was another of his big old fat lies, but liked him saying it anyway. “Put that hand back where it best stay.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Again, he complied.

“And stop that ma’aming me. I’m only a year and a half older than you.”

He nodded like a red-headed woodpecker, licked his lips, then bent his head a bit toward her. She stepped in close and stretched up a bit. She placed a hand on his cheek and neck to steady herself, then touched her lips onto his, gentle like.

Not like when she kissed Charley. Jed’s lips were so soft and full.

She closed her eyes and turned her head, pressing in a little. Jed was such a kind boy, and polite, and oh, how he could play that harmonica! Lifting her free hand to his chest, she snuggled in closer and tighter.

Then suddenly, like her hands had minds of their own making, they grabbed his arms and pulled his hands out of those pockets.

For a heartbeat, nothing more happened. Where were his hands? Hanging mid-air? Then finally, he wrapped her in a bear hug, kissing her the way she wished Charley had. Her heart melted into it.

But then reality cast a shadow over her soul.

Opening her eyes, she leaned back. His popped open, but he didn't release his hold on her. "I love you, Lacey Rose. Truth be known, I always have."

"Don't say that."

"But it's true. Let's get married, and you can live with us. You don't have to run off."

"Jed! Don't be ridiculous. You're only fifteen. My mother'd find out and come shoot you then drag me home."

"I wouldn't let her. And if you was in the family way..."

"No." She pushed back. "I'm leaving."

"But to where? How about I come with you? We'd have the cypress money."

"No. You can't do that. It'd be stealing. Now listen to me. You've had your kiss, and it's time to get this load on to Philips. I've got to get on my way as well. So just climb on aboard and maybe we'll see each other again sometime. Remember your promise, though. Wouldn't want anyone to say Jed Briggs welched on a deal."

A tear rolled down his cheek. "I'm coming sixteen next year. And just like you said, you're only a year older. We could make it work."

Her own tears threatened, but only because of the sadness flowing down his cheeks. The pain in his eyes was very familiar and still fresh in her own heart. He stuck his hand in his side pocket then pulled it back out.

Stepping forward, he took her hand, turned it, and pressed a coin in then closed her fingers around it. "Don't you hurt my feelings any worse by trying to give that back."

She nodded then stuck the coin in her pocket. "Thank you, Jed. You're a good friend."

Like he said, in half a mile, he turned south, but she kept on east. Took a few steps, before turning and watching until the mules carried him and his load of timber around the first curve. You're a good friend.

Why had she said that? Couldn't think up any new lines?

Remorse nicked at her heart, but she didn't want a boy.

And the man she did, didn't want her.



Chester resisted hurrying. The news was old just like his bones, and they didn't take kindly to being bounced around. Besides, who liked being the bearer of bad news?

Soon enough, he hitched the wagon to the front post and walked what amounted to double time for him all the way to the library, but

then found May in the kitchen.

“Sister? A word please.”

“Can it wait? Your wife needs me now, or everything else will get too cold.”

He shrugged, washed his hands, and went to helping. Now or later he could tell his sister what he’d found out, then she could decide what to do next.

Once the women shooed him and finished, she nodded him toward the library, then took the far wingback. He loved sitting it when he could beat Henry there, but that didn’t happen often.

And if the news proved true, maybe never again.

May slipped into the desk chair. “What is it? Supper about ready?”

“Paper reports they’ve promoted Henry to Major General and sent him east.”

“Oh, no. What does that mean, Chester?”

“I’m not sure, but it would appear they will be in the thick of it... if the papers have it right.”

His half-sister closed her eyes, but her lips moved. Oh, how the sight of that woman praying did bless his heart. After so many years, and all his own petitions to the Good Lord on her behalf, she’d found His sweet salvation.

Yes, he loved her, and it pleased him to no end how much she obviously loved the Lord.

But his blessed heart was broke, too. Over Henry fighting for the Confederacy.

How could he?

She looked up. “Anything else? You kept glancing around in the kitchen. I thought perhaps you harbored concern that Laura might come in. Any news on Lacey?”

A sigh escaped, and he shook his head. “The girl bought a stage ticket in DeKalb, heading for Little Rock.”

“When? Do you know? Should we go after her?”

“No, that was a month or more ago.”

“I thought she was going west.”

“Smart girl, that one. Tells us she’s going to find her father’s people then heads east.”

“This come from the Pinkertons?”

“No, ma’am. Someone left a note on the Donoho front desk. Clerk never saw anyone. I wired Little Rock, but the man there said he didn’t remember any young lady traveling by herself.”

“Did you wire DeKalb, too?”

“Yes. Station master said Lacey paid with a twenty-dollar gold piece, claiming she was going to see her father. He didn’t think much of it at the time.”



May wanted to slap that man or worse. Hadn't he got word about the girl running off? Everybody else in the valley had! "Any ideas?"

"How about we write that husband of yours and tell him to send us Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk? They'll have our little runaway tracked and back safe in no time."

She snorted at her brother's lame attempt at a joke. If anyone was coming home it would be Henry. He should've never gone in the first place. He'd served his time fighting for Texas, and the Rangers could take plenty good care of themselves.

If he hadn't insisted on going, he could've kept Houston and Bart home, too.

"Any real ideas?"

"I upped the reward."

She nodded. Not that they'd paid any out, but if the war wasn't over soon, she might have to start digging up the gold her dearest had hid all over the ranch. "Anything else?"

"Not really. If she don't want to be found...then..." He shrugged again.

Before she could say more, her baby burst into the room.

"Supper's ready, and Aunt Jewel needs you to come help her, Uncle Chester."

"Oh, she does? Since I'm so busy in here talking with your mother, how about you handle my part? You're getting so big and all."

Charlotte grinned. "I'm not that big, and you're only saying that to try and trick me." She looked at her mother. "He keeps forgetting how smart I am."

"Yes, he does, little darling of mine."

"Hey little miss, how about helping an old uncle up, then I'll assist your mama up, so we can wobble into the kitchen together."

Grasping both his hands, she leaned all the way back, and he made a show of struggling to his feet in a cloud of giggles. "Why you're so old, Uncle, you might just die before you get all the way in there to the table. But it'll be alright."

He put his hands on his hips. "Alright! Alright? What would make you say such a thing, young lady? Wouldn't you miss me?"

"Oh, for certain, I truly would, but if you was dead, then I could get your helping of the blackberry cobbler! Don't you see?" Charlotte giggled more and turned. "You see, don't you, Mama? You'd let me have it, too. Wouldn't you?"

Scooping his niece into his arms, he lifted her high over his head,

tickling her ribs. "That's a terrible thing to say, little girl. You want my cobbler, huh?" May loved the way Chester teased with her precious daughter.

May smiled.

She took so much pleasure in her baby girl but worried for her, too.

Lord knew of late, concern veiled any true joy in the Buckmeyer home.



He set a new stack of dirty dishes next to Lacey Rose, then scooted past, scraping himself against her backside in the too-small kitchen. She turned and glared.

He smirked. "What's the matter?"

"You. Stop touching me."

Grinning, all evil looking with his snaggletoothed teeth, he stepped forward and reached toward her chest. She flung the soapy plate in her hand at him, but he dodged it. The thing smashed on the floor into a million pieces.

"Don't you dare. I'm warning you."

He laughed. "Hey, little darling, this here's my place. Sign out front's my witness, and I'll dare whatever I want." He licked his lips then moved closer.

Grabbing a steak knife, she held it out toward him, as she backed toward the door to the front room. "Get me my money, every cent I've earned, right now. I quit!"

"What money? That plate you just broke cost more than a day's wages, not counting all the food you've been wolfing down. Who could have ever telled you'd eat like a lumberjack?"

The guy acted like a chowderhead from the start, and she'd never liked him, but now she hated him. "Liar, give me my money, or I'll go straight to the sheriff."

"Aww now, no need getting the law involved. Put that knife down, and we'll talk about it." He leered, inching closer. "Let me show you how a fresh little gal like you can make loads of money—for the both of us."

She backed away another step then bumped into something rock solid. She glanced over her shoulder. A gent in fancy clothes stood in the doorway.

"Something wrong here?"

"I'll say! This gal is a thief, been hiding the silver in her dress."

Lacey looked from the dandy to the man she'd been working for. "Liar, you been putting your hands where they don't belong."

“Now who’s lying?”

“That his knife you’re holding, miss?”

“Yes, but...”

“Put it down, and I’ll see you out.”

“Not without my money. He owes me.”

“How much? What have you earned?”

She tore her eyes off the liar and faced the gentleman. “He hired me for a dollar fifty a day plus found.”

“Why, you little...a thief and a liar! I ain’t never paid dishwashers more than a dollar, less food—not plus. I’d go broke quicker than a lightning strike paying those wages.”

The man stepped between Lacey and the proprietor. A pistol materialized in his hand. “Give the young lady her money now.”

The idiot snorted then pulled a green back out of his pants pocket. “She sure ain’t worth dying over, but a dollar’s all she has coming. The plate cost more than that.” He held the bill out.

Lacey reached around the man, grabbed the money, took off her apron, and threw it at him. “Don’t you ever come near me again, or you’ll be sorry. You hear me?” She hurried out the kitchen’s door.

The few patrons still littering the place stared as she hurried past, but she didn’t care. She never should have taken a job washing dishes in a saloon anyway.

Pushing through the double half-doors, she stepped into the night then filled her lungs with the sweet air.

Now what was she going to do?

“May I walk you home, Miss? Fort Smith isn’t the kind of town for a lady such as yourself to be walking alone after dark.”

She turned around. The gent tipped his hat.

“Thank you, kind sir. And for helping back there, but I can make my own way. Haven’t got that far to go.”

“Lacey, right?”

“No, you must be mistaking me for someone.” Her heart quickened. How could he know her name? She hadn’t used it in weeks. “My name’s Beatrice. Beatrice Jones, but my friends all call me Bea.”

No nevermind how he knew.

The need to get away from the man overwhelmed her. “I do thank you kindly though, and bid you good night.”

Smiling as nonchalantly as she could, she turned and made herself stroll down the sidewalk.

Suddenly, he walked beside her. How had he done that without her hearing? “The Pinkertons have a flyer out on you, Lacey, with a sizable reward offered. If you want to remain free, best let me help you.”

She stopped in her tracks and stared into his eyes. "I'm sorry, I have no idea what you're talking about." Her heart thundered in her chest. Her feet wanted to bolt, but that would only confirm his suspicions.

"Two hundred gold is a lot of coin, but Fort Smith telegraph is down, and I've been thinking. You might be exactly what I need."

So they'd upped the reward. Last she heard, it was only a hundred. "However might it be that a young Virginian woman is what you need, sir? I assure you, I am not for sale, but if I were, it would be ten times that amount."

"I'm not in the market to buy flesh, ma'am. I am needing a partner."

"To do what?"

"Ever play any stud poker?"

She nodded. Used to play with the boys for matches, but never for money. "You're a gambler?"

"Yes, ma'am." He leaned over slightly at the waist, then extended his hand. "Jack Spade. Pleased to meet you."

A giggle escaped. "Really? Jack Spade?"

"My father before me was a gambling man...with a wicked sense of humor, and my mother... Well, she never could stand up to him. So..."

Taking his hand, she immediately marveled at its softness. Not a callous anywhere she could feel, but with a strength that he didn't use. "Bea Smith. Glad to meet you, Jack."

"A minute ago it was Jones, dear."

His eyes made it easy to look into them. She held his gaze, gave him no hangdog oops expression, and squared her shoulders. "Call me whatever you want."

He covered his grin with his hand, giving her the once over, then nodded. "How does Alexandra sound?"

"Ooo, I like that. Fancy and good as any, but exactly what is it you have in mind?"

"If you're hungry, we can discuss it over a late supper. My treat, of course."

Of course she was hungry, she was always hungry. And what could it hurt for her to listen to what he had in mind? He had saved her after all.

How old was he anyway? Mid-twenties maybe. No more than thirty. Definitely older than Charley, and definitely a man.

"Thank you, Mister Spade. I'd love to."

Chapter Five

The shave-tail lieutenant handed over the last letter to the last man. Those who received none gave a collective groan as the regiment broke ranks. Charley pocketed his and the boys' mail and headed to the field kitchen.

Shame Houston and Bart had KP. Guess having Buckmeyer and Baylor as last names didn't cut a path in the general's army.

Safe saying Uncle Henry made extra sure of it.

Charley stopped just inside the tent. The small mountain of spuds that still needed peeling made him grin, but that didn't bother his boys any. Neither even bothered looking up from their chore.

"Hey, girls. You both got letters. Want me to read them to you while you work?"

Houston scowled then shook his head. "I'll read my own mail in my own time."

"Me, too. How about you helping?" Bart pointed his knife. "We'll not make mess without aid."

"I will if you two will answer me one question each."

"Sure."

"Anything."

Charley found a stool then held out his hands. "Wait, count out yourselves ten taters each and hand me a dozen over here."

They complied.

"Now, I've got two bits says I can peel my twelve before either of you two privates can skin your ten."

"I'll take that bet."

"Me, too! You say go, Sarge."

Charley won the first round then lost the next two. Wouldn't do him taking all their coin. Then he upped the wager to four bits, and beat them both around the stump and back.

With all the taters finally peeled, he stood, wiped his knife, and slipped it back into its sheath. "Meet me in my tent after mess."

"What about your question?"

"I'll ask—and you two young ladies will answer—after supper."

As expected, the boys beat a hasty retreat to his canvas domicile, demanded their letters first thing, then sat cross-legged in the dirt reading by his lamp's light.

"Want to trade?" Houston held out his letter toward Charley.

“Not yet. You about finished, Bart?”

He nodded but kept on reading, smiled real big, then looked up.

“Am now.”

“Either of you heard a word about Lacey Rose?”

“No. And she hasn’t written in a long time either.”

“Yeah, and used to, we’d always get one from her even if it was short. You hear from her?”

“Nope, not a word since my last letter.”

Houston shook his head then held Charley’s eyes. “You know anything?”

“No, but...well...I wrote her right after that first little fight we had with the Blue Coats, and see....”

“What did you tell her?” Bart balled his fists like he wanted to fight or something stupid.

“Nothing bad. Only that I figured she should think of me as kin, and uh...that we men might be gone ten years or better. Aw, boys...I didn’t know exactly what to say. I didn’t want her pining over me.”

“Why not?” Houston threw his arms out, palms up. “Who better?”

“She’s in love with you. Has been for years.”

“She tell you that, Bart?”

“Not in so many words, but we both saw it.” The younger by seven months nodded toward his best buddy. “Anyone but you, Charley, we’d both been sick about it.”

Houston nodded. “He’s right, and you’re dumb as a foxtail if you don’t know it. She’s been sweet on you for years, like Bart said.”

“Why didn’t either one of you chowderheads say something?”

“We figured you knew, right Bart?”

“Kind of...maybe.”

“What does that mean, you sweet on her, too?” Houston poked the boy’s shoulder.

“I don’t know. She said I was her best friend on account we’re both half-breeds. Guess I sort of hoped it was true.”

After Charley read their letters, and then his, he sent the two off. They both had one more day in the kitchen, and being late meant a whole extra one.

Deep into the night, he examined his heart. He’d been gone over five months, and not a day passed by that he didn’t think about her. How many times had he relived that kiss? Her boldness...him kissing her back.

Was that love? Could it be he just didn’t want to admit it? Why hadn’t those two said something though?

That bothered him bad.

Her not wanting to write to him wasn’t so strange, more a given. But she loved those boys, both of them. And before, she wrote them

regular. Why hadn't she at least sent them a letter since his to her?

Something must have happened. Had to.

Reveille found him still on his cot. He couldn't remember the last time it had. Through chow, he toyed with the notion of writing her again, but then mid-morning everything changed. The regiment got orders to go south. General Buckmeyer himself informed the troops they'd been ordered to San Antonio.

Suited Charley. He'd killed more men than he ever wanted before his first shave. Besides, he'd like getting a good look at the Alamo.



"Excellent."

Lacey grinned at Jack, then handed him the fresh shuffled deck.

"You're a good teacher."

"Think you're ready for the big time?"

She hiked her off shoulder and studied the fancy room. Traveling first class suited her fine and beat her original plans like an ace on a deuce. "What happens if I lose?"

"Nothing."

"We'll still be partners?"

"Yes, we will. You still afraid I'll send you home, Lexie? Collect the reward?"

How could he read her mind? From that first night, he'd known what she'd been thinking. "Sir! Alexandra, if you please. Alexandra Paulos." She stuck her nose up a fraction in the manner he'd taught her. She truly enjoyed acting a little blue at the mizzen.

He chuckled. "Good girl, now go look on my bed."

She scooted her chair back from the little table where she'd been practicing, waited to see if he was getting up, then when he stayed seated, strolled into the connecting larger room.

There on his bed, a beautiful red ribbon topped a fat bundle wrapped in fancy paper. She called out without taking her eyes off the package. "What is it?"

"Open it. You'll see."

She glanced over her shoulder. Jack stood in the doorway smiling. "But..."

"Open."

Slowly, she untied the ribbon, then carefully folded out the paper revealing a splash of blue and a thick band of lace. She lifted the beautiful dress and held it out. About the fanciest she'd ever laid eyes on.

Holding it beneath her chin, she twirled and faced him. "Thank you, it's so elegant. I love it."

“Happy birthday.”

Oh, goodness! He remembered. What a wonderful gift! Wait. How’d he even know? “But I never told you. Matter of fact, it isn’t until tomorrow, the sixteenth of November. How’d you know?”

“May Meriwether Buckmeyer.”

Her back stiffened. What was going on? “The author?”

He laughed. “One and only. I’ve read all her books. You were the baby born in *The Ranger* named after Wallace Rusk and Sassy Rose Fogelsong Nightingale. At the time, she was married to Charley’s father.”

Lacey returned his half-smile. Just like he said; gather all the information available before you ever make a bet. She tipped her nose up twice the prescribed height.

“You must have me confused with some fictional character, sir, name of Lacey Rose, did you say? A half-breed born to an unmarried mother? Humph! I’ll have you know, I am Alexandra Paulos.”

“Yes, you are. Of course you are. Now try the dress on, so you’ll look the part. We’ve got time before we get to St. Louis to have it altered if need be.”

“Can I wear it this evening?”

“No. You’re not playing tonight.”

“Oh, balderdash! Why not?”

“Ever hear the story of the golden goose?”

Fairy tales? She plopped on the edge of the bed. “Who hasn’t?”

“A couple of the men who’ve been sitting in are going to be in St. Louis.”

“So? I lost last night, just like you told me to.”

“Exactly, and we’ll leave it at that.”

She exhaled. “Fine, what are we going to do then?”

“I have a supper date. You, my dear, may amuse yourself however you choose as long as you stay in your room.”

Perfect. Just the way she wanted to spend the evening. Alone. And while he took another woman to dinner. Not that she wanted anything more from him. Or did she?

No! She hated him too often. He said they were partners, but he made all the rules! And though he absolutely forbid her from receiving any gentleman callers...he on the other hand....

What was fair about him doing whatever he pleased with whomever he wanted whenever he decided to then telling her to stay in the room? Nothing, that’s what. It was a man’s world, indeed.

That’s what Laura Langley Rozier always said, that woman who used to be her mother.

Alexandra Paulos’ mother—minor royalty if anyone must know—lived in Greece in her big house on a hill overlooking the

Mediterranean Sea, hosting dinner parties and attending operas.

She smiled at the big old lie Jack had made her memorize.

Only took two sessions with the ship's seamstress, and the dress fit like one of Aunt May's fancy party gowns the hateful Laura Langley Rozier sewed.

Never made Lacey anything but plain old, drab everyday work garb. Humph. Jack Spade got her shoes to match, and a feather hairpiece with blue plumes.

The image in the mirror looked like a beautiful exotic woman, not at all like Lacey anymore. If only Charley could see her now....

The next day, sporting a little rouge and wearing her second best dress, one of the first Jack bought for her, she checked herself into one of St. Louis' better hotels. Her mentor went on off to the best.

She tried to wait patiently, but found herself pacing the room. Nervous as a cornered turkey at Thanksgiving, she hoped she could remember it all.

Everything he'd been teaching her swirled together and balled in her gut, almost as big as the wad of greenbacks he'd stuck down in the bottom of her carpetbag. She'd never seen so much cash in all her eighteen years, except she'd done some fancy aging since being in Jack's company.

Alexandra Paulos, older and much wiser, turned twenty-two back in June.

And that woman just loved playing poker.

Every international woman on tour needed one little vice, didn't she?

Lacey loved playing the part.

Flipping her new fancy little fan open, she played with it, watching the mirror and loving the effect. After all—she held her hand out bent at the wrist as though a fancy dude wanted to kiss it—wasn't that money's purpose? To be multiplied at the card tables?

No matter how many times she rehearsed his words, the thought of losing all the dollars clouded her soul, but she had to keep him happy, or he might haul her back to Texas, hand her over, then start anew with his reward cash.

Why had they upped it to five hundred gold? That woman couldn't leave well enough alone!

At half past six, she changed her dress then admired her reflection. She couldn't get enough.

Just like Mister Spade always said. You'll distract them with your beauty until you start gathering their coin. He probably only gave such compliments on account of knowing how very much she enjoyed hearing them.

But—moving closer to the mirror, she scrutinized the girl there—

anyone who looked hard enough could see she was plain at best. If not for the nice clothes he bought for her and her hair...no man would even take a second look.

God sure gifted her with beautiful thick dark hair, and it tickled her backside below the waist after she washed it. Jack always commented on it, and paid a woman a lot to have her curl it and pin it up so pretty.

She turned slightly, trying to look over her shoulder and see the back of it. The turquoise blue headpiece secured over her left ear sure set it off, too.

At exactly a quarter after seven, she entered the game room at the St. Louis Gentleman's Club. While buying the minimum stake—a thousand dollars' worth of chips—she scanned the chamber.

Only one other lady played at the far table to her right. Was she a student of Jack's also? Or one of the other dandies aplenty in the place?

Strolling the perimeters with a drink in his hand, he never even looked Lacey's direction that she caught. She moved to her left and took a seat at a table with four players and two empty chairs.

Painstakingly, she built her stack to twelve hundred thirty. He proved to be a good teacher. Per his instructions, she'd spotted the better player and refused to lock horns with the shark.

At half past midnight, the last ten players came together at the center table. All evening, she'd forced herself not to notice Jack and assumed he did the same.

Twice it came down to just him and her, and precisely as he'd predetermined, she bluffed him out of big pots each time. She'd loved raking the chips in then stacking them neatly.

Ooops, had she accidentally let the handsome cowman sitting beside her see her hold card? Tsk. tsk. She smiled demurely. He winked.

Then it came, the very hand for which he'd been preparing her. Red ace up with its sister in the hole.

First three rounds of betting grew the pot to over five thousand. The galoot sitting next to her looked like a fancy rancher and threw his money around like he owned all of Texas. Caught a third king on his last round of cards.

Her heart stopped beating. Almost all of her money huddled in the middle of the table in the biggest mound she'd ever seen there.

The ace of spades fell onto her little row of pasteboards. She remembered to turn her lips down a hair as she sucked her lungs full. Could they all hear her crazy heart? Beating so loud, pulsing blood to every nerve's end?

An hour and a half later, back in her room, she emptied her purse

on the bed and started separating the bills by denominations. Before she got the little darlings all sorted, he plied his special knock on her door. She grabbed her pistol then stood next to the portal.

Reaching over, she rapped three times, waited a breath, then sounded another tap a bit louder. At a proper answer of two timed knuckle knocks, she opened up.

Grinning like a freed slave, he strolled in holding a big bottle of alcohol and two elegant stemmed glasses. She shut and locked the door then faced him. "Just like you said! I couldn't believe it! The whole thing went exactly as you said it would."

"I was there, remember?"

She laughed. "Yes, you were! I about had a stroke when the rancher's third king fell, but oh! I do love the ace of spades! You're the Jack for sure, but I'm the Queen of Spades."

When he unwrapped the top of the bottle, it popped loud like a gunshot, and she squealed. He grinned and poured the two glasses. Holding one out to her, he winked. "Time to celebrate, Queenie. You ever tasted champagne?"

"Not before tonight." She took a long drink. "Umm, it's so bubbly."

Before the sun brightened the new day, Lacey Rose awoke to the reality of her actions. Jack snored softy next to her.

Oh, Lord, what have I done?



Charley handed his letter to the general, waited until his uncle finished reading it, then took it back. "Sir, the next cotton train isn't due for a week. With your permission, I'd like a few days of leave."

Henry leaned back. The man had aged considerable. Charley liked the salt and pepper beard he now sported and wondered how long Aunt May would let him keep it once the war finally ended.

"What do you have in mind, Son?"

"I can be across the Rio Grande in two days, two back will give me three there to see if I can find out anything."

"No telling where she is, Charley. The last anyone knew, she got on a stage in DeKalb headed east, and that was a good while ago. Who could be sure she really even went to find the Comanche? She might have only been trying to frighten her mother."

"You've known about Miss Laura calling her a half-bred and her running off?"

He nodded. "Nothing anyone could do, short of deserting."

"But if I'd only been aware sooner...."

"Even then, there was no guarantee any of us could have tracked

her down. May and Chester put a reward for her safe return, but so far, not one word.”

“Still, sir, with all due respect, I’d like to try. If there is a white woman living with the People, I can find out.”

“Liable to get your hair lifted.”

“No, sir. I still speak Comanche, and in case you’ve forgotten, that bunch Bold Eagle sent to steal me and Mama didn’t lay a hand on any of us.”

The General smirked a bit. As though of all his days, that one he’d ever forget. “I suppose Houston and Bart are clamoring to go with you?”

“Yes, sir, but if you give permission, I told them only to Laredo. They’d slow me down across the river.”

“We got nine mounts that will hold up to the trip?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your daddy and Wallace know about this?”

“Yes, sir. Wouldn’t be standing here if they didn’t.”

His Uncle Henry fell silent then nodded. “Don’t expect a rescue party, and both those boys best light out back here if you’re late.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me. I love that girl, too.”

Chapter Six



After that first night, Lacey Rose didn't see a reason—or really want to—tell Jack no. Maybe not in her mother's eyes or the world's, but far as God was concerned, she became a married woman that first night.

She hinted at it a time or two, but the words never came out right. No, nothing like hey, let's make it legal.

Nothing simple and to the point anyway.

And he never took her bait.

On the bright side, poker proved quite profitable; winning way more than she lost, life was grand...except for the nights he didn't come to her room. She wanted to follow him, but didn't dare. A part of her figured he was still seeing other women, but...maybe she didn't want to know for sure and certain.

From St. Louis, he took her to Chicago then on to New York, winning and spending money like the supply would never end. She loved the traveling, and he stayed with her most nights since he didn't know women in every new town.

Then one night in a seedy little private club on a side street off Broadway, everything changed.

As always, Alexandra came alone a solid hour after Jack, flitted and flirted, won some, lost some until the chowderheads and shoe clerks got weeded out. Like most nights, it came down to one last table of winners.

Not long after midnight, her two red aces appeared, one up and the other in the hole. Her favorite hand!

The gent in front of her had himself a pair of kings showing. That night, same as that first so many months ago, he caught his third king on the last round. The ace of spades fell for her.

Without hesitation, he bet the pot, three thousand two hundred fifty dollars. She called, but before she could turn over her third ace, the man next to Jack—who'd been dealing—jumped to his feet.

"Hold it right there! Spade here's been dealing seconds."

Her mentor jumped to his feet. "What are you talking about?"

The club's owner strolled in with a rather large man at his side. Lacey made herself avoid Jack's eyes, but she couldn't make her heart stop pounding in her chest.

"What's the ruckus?"

“Spade here is dealing seconds. The ace of spades was on the bottom of the deck a minute ago, now the lady has it. If I’m figuring right, she has a third ace in the hole.”

The owner’s man reached over her shoulder and flipped the red ace. “Looks like they’re working together, boss.”

“That right? You and Spade in cahoots?”

She stood slowly and faced the proprietor. Hoping with everything in her that Alexandra could pull it off, she tilted her chin. “Sir, I have been seeing Mister Spade here and there, around town, at games. But I don’t know this word ‘cahoots’...exactly what are you asking?”

“Are you working together? You and him partners?”

“Heavens, no!”

The man faced Jack’s accuser. “You sure it weren’t the ace of clubs you saw?”

“Positive.” He flipped over the pile of discards, the ace of clubs showed the third turn. “I’ve suspected him before. The man’s a cheat I tell you.”

“Break his fingers.”

“What? No!” She didn’t have to feign her indignation. “That’s barbaric! I demand you call the proper authorities. Let them sort this out.”

The ruffian grabbed Jack then smiled at Lacey. “What do you care if you don’t know the scumbag?”

She ran around the table. “Please, don’t hurt him.”

Jack glared at her.

Then his screams drowned out her own. One at a time, the baboon bent each finger sideways until it snapped.

Then it was over, and they threw him out.

She helped him back to her room, woke the clerk, and insisted he find a doctor and a bottle of whiskey. The hooch helped some, but had about worn off by the time the doctor showed.

Praise the Lord for laudanum.

After a third swig of the elixir, chased with the last of the whiskey, Jack closed his eyes just as the new day broke. Then Lacey closed her own.

“Oh, no.” He sat up in bed, holding his hands out.

The late morning sun shone bright through the eastern window.

“What’s the matter, need more medicine?”

“Yes, but then you’ve got to go to the Astor House and check me out. Fetch my bags and tell the clerk there was an accident. See if he’ll give you a refund. The key is in my pants’ pocket.”

She pushed herself out of the rocker. “The Astor on Broadway? What room number?”

“Thirty-four, and Baby, I’m registered under Jackson Spencer.”

She started to ask why, but what difference did it make? She'd signed in at the Howard as Alexandra, so who wasn't lying?

The Astor House no less.

And while he made her stay in second class hotels. Well, he got himself caught double dealing, but she was the fool. What if those bawdies had broken her fingers, too? She'd known Jack was a cheater—a double-dealing swindler.

After a short ride in a hired carriage, she climbed the stairs to the third floor then stuck the key in room four.

"Jack? That you?"

"No."

"Well, whoever you are then, come back later. I'm not dressed."

Lacey followed the female's voice through the rather large sitting room to the master suite. "What are you doing in here?"

"What's it to you? Clean and get out."

"I am not the housekeeper."

"Don't tell me he's got a daughter?"

"No. He's nowhere near old enough to be my father. I'm his partner. Who are you? And what are you doing here?" Her chest tightened, and breaths came only with full purpose.

"Wow." The lady grabbed a housecoat. "Where did he dig you up, Sweetie? I mean I knew he likes them young, but what are you? Fifteen?"

Lacey shook her head.

A sporting woman Jack hired.

Fighting back tears, she cleared her throat. "Look, ma'am, there's been an accident, and he's going to be staying with me. I've come to check him out. You best get dressed and get out...."

How could she be such a fool?

She shrugged. "Or stay. I don't care, but I'm checking him out." Without another look at the floozy, she went to gathering his things. After a double check, she left the woman inside, closed the door to room four, then stopped at the front desk. She turned in his key and asked for his refund.

"Sorry, ma'am. Hate to hear about Mister Spencer's accident, but we don't offer refunds."

She started to protest, but decided better of it. Jack needed her and spending another minute under the same roof with his whore... her stomach soured more by the minute.



Charley scooped a second helping of taters then passed the bowl to Houston. When his plate had no more room, he looked to the head of the table.

Uncle Henry held out his hands. Levi, on his right, took one, and Wallace to his left grabbed hold of the other, and so it went with all the others at the mess table. Every head bowed during the prayer.

Like always, Charley ate deliberately, never losing himself in a meal. Of all the lessons he'd learned from Bold Eagle, keeping his wits at all times had served him the best. The war chief dangling from the end of a rope still haunted his dreams, but the old boy had brought it on himself.

Should have left well enough alone. Pride propels a man to do all sorts of foolish things.

Shortly, with the meal finished, dishes cleared, and only family remaining—the general's once a month indulgence that caused a few malcontents to grumble—Uncle Henry leaned forward with his elbows on the table.

Personally, Charley loved the time, almost like being at home. Figured the others were just jealous.

Everyone appreciated any time spent with Henry Buckmeyer.

“Got two pieces of news today.” He looked at each in turn then shook his head. “Lee engaged the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg earlier this month.” Scanning the faces, he lowered his voice. “After three days of bloody battle, Bobby Lee ended up retreating. Reports say he's vowing to fight on, but...” He checked the room and its entrances. “I do not want you taking any chances.”

Charley, and the other four answered in the affirmative.

Henry leaned back. His eyes watered, and his lips thinned. “Governor Houston died day before yesterday.”

“Oh, no. How?”

“Pneumonia.” For a bit he didn't say more, then as though he'd grieved for his friend all he would allow himself, his face turned hard. “Our plans for a Second Republic died with him. We must survive this terrible war. Our families and Texas will need us more than ever.”

No one said anything, then Charley leaned out. “Uncle, I'd like some leave. Heard about a white woman the Comanche took in trade. Could be Lacey Rose.”

“Son, it's been over two years now. I'd hate myself if something happened to you chasing rumors.”

“I agree, Little Partner.” Levi looked him in the eyes. “If Lee surrenders, then the war could be over in a few weeks...no more than a month. Once it is, Wallace and I will go with you. We'll track Lacey down and do whatever it takes to bring her back home.”

“Can me and Bart go with them, Pa? We love Lacey more than

anyone.”

Bart jumped to his feet. “I’m going with or without Houston, right, Pa?” He looked to Levi.

Before the Colonel could answer, Henry held his hands up. “Hold it, boys. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. In the meantime, we do our job and get through this war.”



Houston aimed then flipped his knife. It stuck into the board a quarter inch closer to the mark than Bart’s. “Ha, that’s six bits you owe me.”

“No, it’s only four.”

“Welcher, you said double.”

“Did not, said I ought to. Clean your ears out.” The younger boy couldn’t ever best him, and he knew it got his goat. “I said your luck was bound to run out.”

“Well, there it is. Pa says there’s no such thing as luck. I’m just better. Admit it. There’s no shame in being second best. Go ahead and admit it, and I’ll settle for two bits, seeing how you blew last month’s pay on that bottle of whiskey you’re too chicken to even yank the cork off of.”

Bart glanced around. “Hush, either of our Pa hears about that, we’ll be peeling taters for a month.”

“Not me.” Houston grinned. “I’m totally innocent in that nefarious plot you’ve hatched.” He looked around. “On the other hand, if I was to give you two dollars to go with the six bits you owe me, then we’d be full partners.” He hiked both eyebrows up and down, probably better than that actor he’d seen in that Austin Opera House last winter.

“Hmm.”

“What do you think? I’m not squeamish over jerking a cork. We can have us a little drink tonight.”

“Three, and we’re smooth.”

His pa would be aghast at him not dickering harder, but it was only giving Bart his own money back. At his last reckoning, Houston figured he was at least a sawbuck ahead. “Deal.”

That night after taps, Houston—with Bart on his heels like a shadow—slipped out of the barracks to the far side of the horse corral and found a nice spot on the backside of the haystack. He loved the smell of fresh cut prairie grass.

Being the oldest, he took the first drink.

Yeeoooo! Liquid fire. Burnt all the way down then exploded in his belly like the whole Union Army set off a barrage of cannons. He

worked hard at staying expressionless and handed the bottle to the closet thing he had to a brother.

“Smooth as silk.”

“Liar, I saw your face.” Bart wrapped his finger around the glass and held it up in the moon light. “Now I’ll show you how it’s done.” He took a long gulp, gasped, then his face screwed itself around. He swallowed hard then grinned. “I’d say more like warm buttermilk on a cold morning.”

Houston laughed. “We’re both liars.” He took the bottle back. That gulp burned, but not quite as white hot as the first. He’d rate the explosion on that slug only a single four pounder. Third round barely warmed his throat. The fourth redeemed his sin of bearing false witness and really did go down smooth as silk; akin to cool well water on a hot day.

“What are you boys doing?”

“Uncle Levi? Uh, Colonel, sir, uh....”

“Pa! What...where...uh, we was....”

Houston tried to hold it, but Bart was slurring his words and looked so pathetic. The hilarity of it erupted in too loud of a guffaw. He doubled over laughing, beating the ground with his fists.

He bit the blood out of his tongue trying to stay the flood of giggles, but it didn’t do no good. Then Bart got tickled.

Scrambling to his feet, Houston saluted, then everything went black right before his face hit something hard.

He woke with the General himself standing over him.

Oh, Lord, what had he done?

Chapter Seven



Levi Baylor studied the two sweaty, stinking privates standing at attention in front of him. “Hot enough for you two?”

“Yes, sir.” Houston beat Bart by half a beat.

“How’s your heads?”

The older grimaced but continued staring at the spot over Levi’s head, while Bart lowered his gaze an inch and pleaded with his eyes.

“We’re about dead, sir. There any way –”

“Silence, soldier.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Besides today’s forage detail, you two will be busting that string of mustangs we just bought.”

Both boys closed their eyes, but neither said a word.

“At ease.”

Their eyes came open as they both relaxed. Houston leaned forward a hair. “Sir, may we speak freely?”

“No. Now there’s something I want to tell you two.” He hesitated a few hard swallows, remembering that day and how it could have changed his life forever. “I know for a fact both of you have heard the story about Henry saving Blue Dog.” He glanced at Wallace. “If memory serves, Rebecca told it again to Charlotte the night before we left.”

“I believe you’re right, Colonel.”

He faced the boys. “Ever wonder what I was doing that morning?”

Both the young men shook their heads.

“That’s the part that gets left out. I was fourteen and plenty full of myself, thinking I was a man. Though in the beginning I resented Henry...and Aunt Sue for hiring him...by that time, I’d seen the kind of man he truly was.

“I’d decided I wanted him to marry Auntie. I like to think I’d have...I don’t know, gone in the water with him? Shot that mongrel trying to kill Blue?

“But instead, I slept soundly inside, totally unaware he could have died. Almost did.”

Both boys’ eyes widened, then Bart shook his head. “Thought it was midmorning, Pa. The sun never beats you up.”

“Oh, I’d been up, but my head hurt so bad even the hot bath and pot of coffee Uncle Henry got me couldn’t cut the pounding from the

pint of rot gut I'd swilled the night before."

His words pushed both boys back. Their mouths gaped open, but neither spoke.

"I'd won some money playing mumbley peg and..." A sigh lifted his shoulders, and he shrugged. Praise the Lord, it had worked out for him. "I wasn't there for Henry when he needed me. And when I asked, Sergeant Nightingale tells me you two didn't pull your weight today, that the two of you barely cut a ton of hay."

Again both remained speechless.

"What if a Comanche raiding party had hit us last night? Or a brigade of blue coats had come calling for breakfast?"

"They –"

"Silence."

"Yes, sir."

He glanced at Wallace. "Anything you want to add, Major?"

"No, you covered it fine, sir."

Levi looked back to his son and brother-in-law-of-sorts.

"Hopefully, you two have learned why we don't allow drinking on post. And if either of you two so much as smells a cork again before this war is over, it'll be a month in the brig and permanent K.P. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now get out of here. Clean up. You both stink."

The two came to attention, saluted, then turned and marched out. Levi held it until they had to be out of earshot then chuckled and faced Wallace. "Why didn't you tell them about that time in Laredo?"

The major shook his head. "Neither of those boys knows about my sordid past. How can you tell that story without mentioning the sporting ladies I was in lust with? Best we let those days stay out in our past. They're under the blood now."

True enough and good advice, but unfortunately, Levi's sins were visiting his son. Hopefully, Bart would not have to kill as many men as he had stalking his dreams.

But regrettably, Charley was well on his way.



Every time he was lucid enough for Lacey Rose to ask about his floozy, he had her pour more laudanum down his gullet then chased it with a slug of whiskey. She hated him hurting so badly, but truth be known, it served him right.

Got caught double dealing! She could have beat that game straight up.

Each time she returned, the room stank of man—sweat and

medicine—throw in the whiskey, and it could make a woman lose her breakfast. Good thing he'd stashed all those gold coins in his bag.

And even better that she got to the Astor House when she did, before that woman found them.

She still cringed every time she thought about all the greenbacks she'd left on that poker table.

Mid-morning of the eighth day, the second of August according to the New York Times he been reading all spread out on the bed, it wouldn't wait another minute. He'd gone a whole hour without a sip or nip of anything. She sat in the straight back, out of his reach.

Not that he could do anything with those busted up fingers.

"So what's her name?"

He looked up, holding both bandaged hands out. "Who are you talking about?"

"The woman in your hotel room."

"There was a woman in my room?"

Man, did the liar ever have a great poker face. "Yes, and when I walked in, she called your name. All sweet and nice like you and her were old friends."

"What'd she look like?"

"Don't insult my intelligence. How many whores live in your room?"

He chuckled. "None. Now what did she look like?"

"Thirtyish, dark hair, no clothes, in your bed...recollecting anything? Random memories?"

He squinted one eye then smiled. "Sounds like my wife. Did she throw anything at you?"

Tears welled. "You're...you're...married?"

"Was. Not anymore. She comes around some if she gets wind that I'm in town."

"Why? If you're not still married?"

"Money. Old times. A fight? Who knows? She's crazy. Good thing I wasn't there."

"How'd she get into your room?"

"Don't know. Remember? I wasn't there. Tell you for sure I didn't invite her though. You're the woman I love. And I'll never want another."

The blood drained from her face. He loved her? He'd never said that before. "You do? Really? You mean that? You're not just saying it because of her, are you?"

"No, I really do, Alexandra. I love you with my whole heart." He held his arms out.

She jumped up, stepped in close and kissed him, then leaned back. "What's her name?"

He smirked, shook his head, then gave her a fine-I'll-tell-you-anything shrug. "Melanie Washington, George's double grandniece if you're gullible enough to believe her. Except last I heard, she's still using Spencer."

"So that's your real name? Jackson Spencer?"

"That's what's listed in the family Bible, but I prefer Jack Spade. Like the sound of it, don't you? And don't you like Alexandra better than Lacey Rose?"

Uncertain who she was anymore, she didn't know if she liked either. Her shoulders bobbed in response to his question. "I'm not sure."

"Well, I know this much. We need to get out of town."

"But why? You can't travel, not yet. What's your hurry?"

"The draft."

"But the lottery was last month. Don't you remember? The Irish rioted over it. You really suppose they'll have another one so soon? Do you?"

"Depends. Old Abe needs cannon fodder. Robert E. Lee is winning battles left and right, and even Bloody Grant can't take Vicksburg."

She didn't care about the stupid war. Let all of them kill each other. But they had no right to make her Jack fight. He couldn't get drafted. Why would they want him anyway with two unusable hands? "Where are you thinking to go?"

"How much money we got left?"

"Fourteen Double Eagles, another thirty bucks or so in silver."

He held his hands over his head. "Shake the bed."

"Why? I don't want to hurt you." Except a part of her did, him being married before and never mentioning it once.

"Let's see if I can stand a train ride."

He could, but only with too much sipping and nipping on his medicine. Left her to do it all. The tickets, the baggage, getting him settled in. But wasn't that what a wife did? Take care of her man?

The Great Lakes steamer proved much easier on him, and though he didn't stop completely, he'd cut back considerably on the medicine and the whiskey, which certainly came at a price.

All told, took two weeks, five fifths of hooch, and four pints of laudanum to make Chicago, but some movement returned to his fingers during the trip.

Two days after Union General Blunt's forces captured Fort Smith, Arkansas, following the battle of the Devil's Backbone, Lacey spent the last Double Eagle booking two weeks in a south side hotel that neither she nor Jack would have ever been caught dead in before his accident. Except...it hadn't been an accident at all.

That's just what he called it.

First night there, he swilled the last of his medicine, flopped down at the room's little table, then nodded at his bag. "Hand me a new deck."

She did as told—not really seeing why—and held it out. "That was the last pint."

"I know. Sit down. I want to teach you how to double deal."

"Oh, baby, I –"

"Sit. You spent our last Eagle getting us into this dump. We've got what? Another fifteen dollars to our name? How long you think that's going to last?"

She eased into the other chair. "I'll get a job. Let me do that."

"Doing what? Washing dishes? No." He held his hands up. "My fingers may never be right again."

"I can win without cheating."

He nodded toward the cards. "You're willing to risk what little we have left? No, ma'am, I'll not have it. Now shuffle the pasteboards."

The rest of that night and for the next week, he grilled her, but she couldn't ever get it just right without looking. And that, according to him, would prove deadly.

But she hated the idea of cheating, being a cheater, and couldn't wrap her sense of right and wrong around his plan, no matter how hard she tried.

The morning of the next to last paid day, he made her give him all the silver then put on his best suit of clothes.

"Where are you going? What are you doing?"

"Out." He flexed his fingers. They bent about half of normal.

"Whatever it takes. We need a grubstake, and..." He shrugged. "I'll be back. You keep on practicing, and no peeking."

The yessir didn't make it past her clenched teeth. Instead, she lifted a shoulder, sat down, and gathered the cards. Sometimes, she hated him all the way around the stump.

He returned before the sun went down, carrying a wrapped package, and grinning liked he'd discovered the rainbow's pot of gold. "Pack up. We're moving."

She loved the Merchants Hotel on Washington Street. Even had a high-backed metal bathing tub in the water closet. Then she enjoyed the late supper with his old friend, Harold Longstreet. Almost like old times.

The man, a nice enough guy for an old fellow, was a bit of a dandy. She couldn't believe it. In just a few hours, it seemed he'd turned fortune around.

Twice, she'd tried to pry it out of him—how he managed to pull it off—but his lips remained sealed, and only one explanation that came to her mind. He must have sold his father's gold watch.

Still, if that were true, why wouldn't he just say so? He certainly laughed and acted as if all the troubles from the horrible attack lay behind them.

For that, she was thankful.

Finishing the last sip of the second round of after-supper brandy, he bid his friend a good night then whisked her back to the room. More surprises! A silky red nightgown. She held it up to her chin.

"I love it, Jack, but I'm dying to know. How did you ever accomplish this? Where did you go this afternoon? What did you do to turn things around?"

He bit his bottom lip, then pulled up his shirt, revealing a full money belt. With obvious discomfort, he fished out then handed her twenty-five Double Eagles.

"Wow, five hundred dollars."

"Yes. Maybe a loan. From Harold."

"Oh." She didn't like the look in his eyes. "How are we going to pay him back? And why the maybe? I don't understand."

He backed away a step. "Well, either you put on that gown and be nice to Harold when he comes up, or I give him all this money back."

"What? Jack! What are you saying? I can't do that!"

"Maybe you can't, Lacey Rose. And if that's what you decide, I'll abide by it, but I know Alexandra can. She's a survivor. She'd do whatever it took." He backed up another step then put his hand on the door knob. "What's one night compared to twenty-five Double Eagles?"

"But..."

"How many dishes would you have to wash?"

"But, Jack...that's like... No. It is...."

"Fine." His tone dripped with disappointment and disgust.

"Should I go? Or do you want to take Longstreet's coins back to him?"

Chapter Eight



Lacey stared at him. She'd been relegated to fourth wife status.

When just the ladies gathered, either in the bathhouse or the kitchen, sometimes Miss Sassy would tell of the first time Buffalo Hump, the great Comanche war chief, laid eyes on her. He made his displeasure obvious the next morning over Bold Eagle sending his fourth wife to his honored guest's tent instead of his Red Rose, Miss Sassy's Comanche name.

She'd smirked then shrugged. "Almost made me love the savage."

The words played over in Lacey's heart.

Miss Sassy had survived the Indians, a bigamist, and then finally found true love. Lacey could do anything for one night.

No, actually she couldn't, but like Jack said, Alexandra could. That woman would do whatever it took. That lady ate Harold Longstreet and his kind for supper, then left them begging for dessert.

Lifting her chin, she hefted the coins. "I hate you, Jack. And your friend. We'll be checking out tomorrow. I'll find us something nice, clean, but I won't stand for blowing through this money. Do you hear me, Mister Spade?"

"Yes, ma'am. And Alexandra, for the rest of the night, he'd like to have you answer to Myra."

"What? Why?"

"His dead wife's name. You remind him of her."

"Oh, perfect." She snarled her lip. "Get out of here."



Charley sank his spurs deep into the bull-headed bronc's flanks, but he only snorted.

"Had enough, have you?" He leaned forward and nudged the stallion with his knees. The mustang obeyed with an easy walk.

"Wonderful. Good horse." He plow reined to the right. The animal turned. Then left, and it obeyed. He pulled back on the halter, and the beast came to a stop, but pawed the ground like he didn't like it and might be thinking about going another round. Charley waited a bit then swung out of the saddle.

Slowly, he walked to the railing, the lead rope slack. The stallion

followed.

Good, the brute didn't bite him. First, he loosened the buck strap and unbuckled the cinch, then lifted the saddle off and onto the top rail in one quick motion. He rubbed the sweat-soaked hair dry as he could get it then removed the halter.

Shooing the stallion back to the far end of the corral where the rest of the hard cases waited, he glanced west. Enough sun for another one. He grabbed his lariat and walked toward the herd, careful to keep his eyes lowered.

"Hey, Sarge."

The greeting turned him around. Both his boys hurried toward him.

Charley grinned at the pair. "Are the Yankees coming?"

Houston beat the younger to the railing. "Not a chance! They couldn't even get ashore."

Bart joined him. "We just got word. Lieutenant Dowling and forty-four men at Fort Griffin beat four gun boats and seven troop transports. That's what we heard."

"Yeah." Houston grinned. "They captured one Yankee gunboat and over two hundred men."

"No, it was exactly two hundred."

"Was not."

"Now you girls stop your bickering. I'm plum tuckered from busting these broncs you two couldn't handle."

Houston snarled his top lip, but didn't comment on the barb. "Pa, uh, General Buckmeyer to you enlisted types, wants a word."

Charley nodded toward his saddle then once Houston had it slung over his shoulder, he climbed the fence. "Wasn't Dowling and that bunch with him sent out to Fort Griffin as punishment?"

"Yep, and from what Pa—Colonel Baylor to low-life sergeants—says, they spent their time practicing with those new cannons. Seems they got the job done."

"Bart, he's my Pa, too."

"I know. But you started it, calling us girls."

Charley didn't respond, but walked toward headquarters with a boy on each side, same as it had been all their lives, him and his boys. Didn't know what he'd do without them. Though no blood kin to Houston, he loved him like a brother, too.

A chuckle escaped.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You two...or...more us, I guess. Seems like I'm destined to be you two's nursemaid my whole life."

Houston sprang out front, spun, and put his dukes up. "We'll see about that."

Charley shook his head. "It ain't a good day to die. Now behave."

The boy lowered his fists but continued walking backward. "So what do you think? Will we ever see any action?"

"Hope not. That dust-up Pa and Uncle Wallace and I was in...it'll last me the rest of the war."

Bart elbowed him. "That Yankee you killed been troubling you any?"

"Nope." Charley hated lying, especially to his little brother.

"Not even a little?"

"It's war, Bart. They kill you, or you kill them. It ain't on us, just like Uncle Henry said. We didn't start this war, and any soldier we kill is on the head of them who did."

Neither of his boys said anymore. Getting too close to headquarters, and like him, they were under strict orders not to take advantage of being Henry's kin.

Instead of news of Lacey as he'd hoped, the General only wanted to talk about the failed invasion of Texas. After what seemed too long of a diatribe, he stood.

"The Yanks are not going to stop trying. The cotton we've been escorting south is pumping life into the Confederacy. Do not take any chances or ignore any signs."

"Yes, sir, I mean no, sir."

"I want to know about the least little thing. Looks like this war is going to drag on...another year, maybe more. Rumors are running rampant that if Lincoln loses the election next year, and Bobby Lee can hang on, it will be over in early '65."

His uncle didn't say more, but Charley could see the wheels turning.

Even with Governor Houston dead, there still might be a chance Texas could be a Republic again. Charley would like that, but not nearly as much as he'd like finding Lacey Rose safe and sound.

That night, his lie came home to roost. Had to endure the dying screams of the bluecoat he'd run through with his bayonet. With the last moan, as the Union soldier finally died, it all changed. He faced Lacey.

But a thousand Comanche braves stood between him and her, each painted for war.

Above their whoops and coyote calls, a voice rode the blowing winds right into his heart.

"Save me, Charley! Kin takes care of their own."

He sat up then threw his feet over the side of his cot. Bad night when his dead and Lacey stalked his dreams. For a bit, he debated trying to find sleep again, but seldom was able, and so he rose with a stretch and heavy sigh.

His mama claimed Colonel Baylor didn't sleep much either.

Once dressed, he pulled the tent's flap back and stared at the stars. Was Lacey watching them, too? Why had she run off? He never should have written that stupid letter.

At the time, it'd only been a few months, but he'd already been in one fight. It wouldn't be fair for her to wait, never knowing if he'd make it home.

How could he know Uncle Henry would wrangle them the posting in San Antonio, reversing the orders to go east where the battles raged fierce and men died right and left? Someone might almost think Jefferson Davis knew him personally.

He looked past the stars. "Tell her, Lord. Tell my Lacey I'm coming. Just as soon as this war is over. Keep her safe."



Jack dunked the shot glass in the soapy water, rinsed it, then wiped it clean. The front swinging half-doors creaked. He glanced at the mirror, but couldn't make out the newcomer through the smoke haze. He stacked the glass then turned.

Longstreet strolled toward him, dapper as ever, sporting a new walking stick.

What a dandy.

"Hey now, my friend. Whiskey with a beer chaser? I'm not playing tonight."

Once Jack poured the drink and drew the beer, he scooped the silver up and dropped it in the money box under the bar without taking his eyes off the man. "How you doing, Harold?"

"Fair to middling. Came for my money. You got it?"

"Not all of it."

The man tossed the whiskey then took a gulp of beer. "Been a while, Spade. Figured you'd be flush by now."

"No. Bartending doesn't pay much." Jack nodded toward the clientele then Longstreet's empty. "More?"

"Yes, thank you."

Jack poured another shot.

"How are your fingers?" The older man dropped two bits.

Jack put the coins away, then held his hands up and flexed them almost all the way to a good fist. "Getting close."

"How's our girl?"

"Doing fine. But leave her be."

"Can't. I need that young woman. No words to tell you the life she renews in me. I figure, seeing as how you don't have my money, we should strike us a deal."

“Oh, yeah? What do you have in mind?”

While Longstreet laid it out, his own plan, the one he'd only toyed with, finally crystalized. “One month you say. That's all?”

The man held up his right hand. “Yes, sir. On my cousin's honor.”

“What does James have to do with anything?”

“I figured him being a famous Confederate general would carry more water than using what little sway I might have left.”

“Cut the bull. Guarantee me we'll all be in St. Louis in one month.”

“Missouri, huh? I was thinking here in Chicago. Give me an extra week, and we can make Saint Louis.”

For the next few minutes all the plans were finalized and a date set to meet. Sure beat pouring whiskey for drunks.

“I have your solemn word.”

“What do you want, Spade? Cross my heart and hope to die? Think I'm a liar?”

He didn't respond, only held his gaze and waited.

“Fine. You have my word on it.”

Jack stuck out his hand. “Deal.”



Footfalls sounded on the little porch of her rent house. Lacey dropped the dress she'd been working on to her lap. Her heart stopped and paralyzed her throat. She couldn't scream or imagine who it might be.

Her gaze darted right then left. Where was her knife? Or her gun?

The door swung open. Her heart resumed beating, and she was able to swallow. Jack appeared in the doorway with a half-smoked cheroot in his mouth, stinking bad enough from the saloon smoke.

Why'd he have to bring a foul-smelling cigar home with him?

“You're early. Slow night?”

“Nope, I quit. Got a better job.” The stench threatened to gag her, but she took a breath through her mouth, and her tummy settled. Though a million questions sparked her curiosity, she held her tongue.

Better to wait to hear more on the reason he terminated his employment. No reason to get him angry, asking too many questions.

“Really.”

“Yes, ma'am. Superior hours and higher wages.”

“How much more?”

“Depends.” He tossed his hat on the bed and took a drag then blew out the smoke. All without taking the nasty thing out of his mouth. “Harold came by. Wants us to go east with him.”

“I am not interested in going anywhere with that man.” Humph.

Explained the cigar, but him mentioning that man's name was worse than any stench. How could he? She couldn't believe he even gave one thought to going east with the fop. "Jack, sweetheart, I don't want anything to do with Longstreet."

"Then he wants his money back."

"You tell him we don't have it. Explain things will pick up in the spring when the war's over. Why'd you quit?"

"It's only for five weeks, then we'll have him paid off. Plus no telling how much more we'll make." He pinched the cigar, took what surely had to be the last drag, held the smoke then let a little bit of it drift out like some kind of tough hombre or something. "He's offering a fifty-fifty split, less the five hundred and expenses."

She closed her eyes. Why was he doing this to her? She'd never been able to spit out the bad taste left in her mouth from that night with Harold. "What does he want us to do?"

"He needs a partner—that's you—and wants me near to watch his back."

"That's all? No being his make-believe-wife for a night?"

"No, ma'am. Of course not." He dropped the cheroot to the floor then crushed it out. "There's a couple of smaller games he's thinking to hit before we get to this big one in Albany."

"Where's that?"

"New York State, it's the capital. We need to be there in two weeks."

"What if we lose?"

Jack laughed. "Longstreet never loses. He's the best ever at double dealing or palming a cold deck. The man's good enough to win straight up, but he likes doing it his way."

"You'll be right there? The whole time?"

"Yes, ma'am. Watching both your backs."

"Two rooms? Every single night?"

"Yes. Now get packed. We sail in the morning."

"Why aren't we taking the train?"

"We're going to Lansing first; fastest way there is across the lake."

"Oh. So he will be on the same ship?" She wrapped the thread on its spool, set the unfinished dress on top of the others in the box next to her, then glared. "I still hold our money."

"Yes, ma'am. No problems out of me there."

She stood. "You promise, Jack. Five weeks, and we'll be done with him?"

"Yes, ma'am." He put his hand over his heart. "I promise we'll be in Saint Louis on the seventh of April."

No doubt he had his poker face on, but she'd never been able to read him anyway. Not at all like Charley or any of the boys back home


who chased after her. Wonder what Jed was doing? She sighed heavy, wanted him to hear it.

“Fine, I’ll go. But fair warning, my Uncle Wallace taught me how to shoot a long time ago.” She smiled. He had no need to know that on the sly, she traded one of the fancy dresses she’d made for a six-shot Derringer.

“I know. You’ve told me before.” His grin evoked the same reaction as every other time. He held his arms out, and she walked into his embrace.

Instead of kissing him though, she leaned back. “Best tell Longstreet that I will shoot him dead and feed him to the hogs if he tries anything.”

Chapter Nine



Jack got Lacey into her room. Even helped her unpack her bag, then pulled out a cheroot.

“Please. Not in here, you have your own room. No need to gag me, is there?”

“Fine.” He pocketed the smoke. “From now on, we don’t know each other. Harold and I will be upstairs, right above you. But please don’t give it away. A game starts after dinner, always does. Use our cash, but note how much. We can settle up on that later.”

“I hate you, Jack Spade.”

“No, you do not. You love me, and...” He smiled. “Alexandra, dear, please wear that new lavender dress Harold bought you.”


The ship’s horn sounded one long blast. “That’s the all-ashore bell. We’ll be underway soon.” He blew her a kiss. “See you tonight, darling.”

Once the door slammed, he raced to the gangplank, beat the longshoremen by two full steps, then stood on the wharf and watched as the steamer’s two side paddles bit into the waters of Lake Michigan.

“You better keep your word, Harold Longstreet.” He chuckled at the thought of her shooting him and feeding him to the hogs.

Maybe he should have warned his old friend.

Collecting his bag from where he’d hid it that morning, he strolled back to the little rent house. After all, he was paid up another five days.



“Bless you, Lord.” Henry raised his head off the floor then stood. The knees protested some, but he ignored them. His aches and pains wouldn’t slow him down, not with the Yankees on the move. He walked to the next room. “Sergeant, find Colonel Baylor and Major Rusk and send them to me.”

The middle-aged man who couldn’t hit the side of barn with a cannon from six feet away, but proved the best clerk—this side of his wife—that he’d ever had, jumped to his feet. “Yes, sir.” He saluted then toddled out.

Soon, Levi and Wallace stood before his desk. Both saluted.

“At ease, boys. Word is, they moved out of Brownsville, heading upriver.”

Neither man said a word. But both men’s hackles rose.

“Major, you take Charley, Bart and Houston, and get to Laredo. Half that cotton there is ours. The Yankees will burn it if they can.”

“Yes, sir. Can I have the rest of Charley’s squad?”

Henry nodded. “But that’s all.” He turned his gaze to Levi.

Though he hated what he was about to do, if Banks came inland, he’d have all of Texas. Henry couldn’t let that happen.

“Levi, you take half our troops. Rip will have the others. He’s senior, but I’m counting on you, Son. He hasn’t seen half the action you have, and I plan on telling him that he best not make a move without talking it over with you.”

Levi came to attention then saluted again. “Yes, sir.”

Henry returned it then threw his chin toward the door. “Go on now. Don’t either of you dare get hurt.”

Wallace snickered. “These Yankees can’t hold a candle to the Comanche, sir. And they couldn’t get our hair. We’ll be fine.”

“I’m counting on it. Tell the sergeant to fetch Colonel Ford for me.”

Henry hated it that he couldn’t go himself, even worse he had to put Rip Ford in command just because he had time in grade over Levi.

“Lord, keep them safe. Get us all home alive.”



Lacey Rose knew nothing of the war. Didn’t listen to gossip or read the papers that couldn’t seem to get enough of it.

She only wanted it be over.

If she’d known Charley and Uncle Wallace and her boys were riding to Laredo to stop the Yankees from shutting the Confederacy’s back door, she wouldn’t have been able to concentrate on the cards being tossed.

In her perpetual state of ignorance about the battles going on, she’d done right nicely that night at the poker table. Twenty-four dollar and change ahead by her calculations, even though not one time had Harold dealt her any kind of hand.

So her winnings were all from her own skill. She’d add that to the sixty-seven she brought to the game.

Wouldn’t do counting out pennies and nickels like some country bumpkin, especially that being her first steamboat ride. She’d been watching for Jack to come in, but he hadn’t made it yet.

“You remind me of my wife, young woman. May I call you Myra?”

“No! Absolutely not.” She glared across the table at Longstreet,

her face warming. "My name is Alexandra." The venom in her voice quite apparent as she meant it to be, but she softened it a little and added, "Or... Miss Paulos will be fine as well."

The man mumbled something then dealt the cards.

What a thing for him to say! Myra, indeed! He'd definitely caught her off guard.

A red ace landed on top of her down one. She covered her cards with both hands and peeked, but already knew that the other red ace would be there. She'd watched every deal carefully, and just like Jack said, Harold was the best.

Slicker than calf slobber, he'd loaded the deck. She sure figured Jack would've shown by now.

There was a man in the shadows....

The gent two seats ahead of her sported a king. Not who she'd have picked to fleece, but maybe Longstreet had his reasons.

That hand—and the rest of the night—went like so many of hers and Jack's had. She lost most of her winnings to Harold, but hung onto her grubstake and the money she won on her own.

Jack never showed. What could he possibly be doing?

At exactly one a.m., she excused herself with smiles all around. "Must get my beauty sleep, gentlemen. Hope to see you all tomorrow if you happen to be going to Lansing."

Next morning, she found a seat in the dining room three tables away from Longstreet who ate unaccompanied and sat with his back to her.

After a poached egg, half a piece of toast, and two cups of coffee, the man still sat alone. Twice last night, she thought she'd caught Jack lurking, but of course didn't stare or anything.

Now where was he?

Longstreet folded his paper, dropped a bill on the table then strolled out. With a grin, he tipped his hat at her as he walked by, but didn't say a word. She waited as long as she could stand it.

Paying her bill, she strolled through the lobby then climbed the stairs toward her room. Stopping at the door, she put her hand on the knob and looked both ways.

No one in sight. She hurried up to the next level.

Climbing the stairs two at a time, she couldn't remember what number Jack had said they were in. Oh, yes! Right above her he'd said. Passing by the door, she tapped it twice with her foot but kept walking. It creaked. She spun around then ducked inside.

"Where's Jack?"

The latch backed up then eased into the sitting room's chair, still clutching his fancy walking stick. "Good morning, dear Myra. Or should I call you Lacey Rose when it's just the two of us?"

She glared, resisting the urge to retrieve the Derringer in her handbag. Still...she sure was glad to have it. "Where is Jack?"

"I don't know. Somewhere between Chicago and Saint Louis would be my best guess." He shook his head. "We didn't discuss his itinerary. Besides the new loan, I gave him my word I'd have you there on the seventh of April."

What! Her breath caught. He lied to her?

All of it...and left her with the horrible man for more than a month! How could he? She hated him, hated his guts.

A warmth spread over her face, growing hotter until it burned. He'd rot in hell before she ever forgave him the travesty! She whirled and grabbed the door knob, thought better of it, then spun back to face Longstreet.

"Give me my cut. I'm leaving."

He pointed his gold-tipped cane at her. "Your half from last night and the one hundred and two dollars you have in your purse there are mine, so..." He grinned. "Best stick to the deal or..." He raised both shoulders. "I'll have no choice but to report you to the..." He let his words trail off then mouthed sheriff.

She balled both fists and raised them. The weight of the hidden gun reminded her of her handbag full of protection. A smile came to her lips as she retrieved the Derringer. "Give me my money, or I'll shoot you dead."

"No, you won't. You're not a killer. But you do make an excellent partner. Now put that thing away, and let's talk."

Her heart pounded. But his words rang true. No killer, she even hated wringing a chicken's neck. Always recruited Bart to do it for her. That lil' booger seemed to enjoy it. "How much did you give Jack?"

"Another five hundred."

She lowered the gun. "Why?"

"The deal of course. His price for this little ruse we perpetrated on you. I knew you'd be worth way more than that. Jack's a fool. I'd never do what he's done."

"So I'm in the hole a thousand. How much did we make last night?"

He held out his hand, palm up. "Counting the thirty bucks you hung onto, two hundred seventy-four, plus some change."

"That big pot alone had over six hundred in it."

"Yes, but I lost a lot of it back, appears a kindred soul was playing and either I had to expose him or suffer the loss, but he's marked now. That won't happen again."

"Who was it?" Her curiosity couldn't stand not knowing.

"The guy between you and our mark, never laid eyes on the

double dealer before, but he's in Jack's class—before his accident anyway. Maybe better. If not knowing what to look for, I wouldn't have spotted him."

She closed her eyes and recalled the men at the game.

The cheat next to her—mid-thirties maybe—sure didn't seem the part. More like a merchant or a hog buyer. "You sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. Don't feel bad for missing it. Didn't spot it myself until I was already three fifty in the pot. Caught him dealing off the bottom."

"The money I kept, I won on my own, so just put your hand in your lap."

He complied then smiled. "I got you a new dress. It's in there on my bed. Why don't you go try it on?" He nodded toward the closed door to his left.

"Forget it, Harold. And forget that night, too. Might as well, because it'll never happen again. Not even if you know what freezes over."

"Can't do it. Never could forget that night. It's practically all I've thought of since. But the dress...it's special made. There's also a harness you need to wear under it."

She raised the gun back up, but pointed at his kneecap. "I may not be a killer, but you deserve having your knee blown off for even suggesting such a thing."

"Easy, girl. How old are you anyway, Lacey Rose?"

"Stop calling me that. The name's Alexandra." She took a deep breath and shook her head. "Twenty-five. What's it to you?"

"Now, Lacey, didn't your mother teach you the evil of bearing false witness? Alexandra...with her hair up just right...and plenty of face paint...maybe. But you're what? Eighteen?"

She lowered the gun. Sure didn't want to go chasing all over hunting Jack with only a hundred dollars in her purse. Besides, why would she want to do that anyway? She never wanted to see him again!

Maybe she should hear the old fool out. Except Harold Longstreet was one of the smartest men she'd met short of her Uncle Henry.

"I'll be twenty in the fall." She spit the words.

"The new dress has a lot of ruffles that hides an opening in your lap. The harness holds two decks of cards. Go on now and change. We'll have our first lesson in palming a cold one."

She stared. What a mess to be in.

Oh, Charley, why didn't you love me?

Well, anyway she looked at it, she was on her own.

"Are you going to sit right there while I change?"

"Yes, ma'am. I give you my word. I coerced you and Jack for that

most wonderful of nights, and I do cheat at cards, but I am no rapist.” He held his hands out. “I’m harmless, Lacey Rose. You can trust me.” He smiled. “There’s too much at stake for both of us for me to go and mess it up. Never had a partner like you.”

The biggest part of her didn’t like the whole idea, but another part—the one that seemed to be in charge too much of late—nodded. “I appreciate your words, but I’m certain you can appreciate my trust in any man is woefully lacking. Be aware, the gun will be by my side the whole time I’m in there.”

“Understood.”

She backed toward the bedroom door. “I hate Jack, but I hate you more, Harold Longstreet.”

Chapter Ten



Charley, along with Bart and Houston on each side, pushed the cotton bale into place then whistled for the men on the end of the block and tackle to lower it. He stepped back and looked toward the south.

They'd surely come from that direction, best he could figure. He moseyed over next to his honorary uncle. "What do you think, Major?"

"Way too hot for March."

"Whew! No arguments there. But I meant, what about the cotton bales Colonel Benavides wants us to stack?"

"Two high is good, but we need to be out of town, in the corral."

Charley moved closer and lowered his voice. "Did you tell him that?"

Wallace's face hardened, and he nodded ever so slightly. "The Colonel is a good man. Did you know he used to be the mayor here in Laredo?"

"No, sir. Hadn't heard that."

"You tell the boys what I want them to do?"

"They ain't too happy about it."

"Well, you can tell them I ain't happy about fighting Yankees without Levi Baylor watching my back either." Wallace threw his chin north. "They both got an extra mount ready?"

"Yes, sir. All seen to, just like you ordered."

"First word, you get them going."

"Yes, sir. Now about the cotton."

The rest of that morning the bales were arranged into a fort of sorts, then right after a nice nap—Charley loved that Mexican custom—one of the Colonel's kin rode in reporting a thousand bluecoats coming up the river, on the Mexican side.

Shading his eyes, he scanned the horizon. Sure enough, a dust cloud about where the man claimed the Yanks would be. He faced his boys.

"Go on now, you two. And don't spare the horses. We're going to need Pa for sure, and Rip, too, if he's a mind to come."

Houston first, then Bart, glared and kicked the dirt then shook their heads. But both would follow their orders. At first, they only sulked away. "Hey! We need reinforcements! Get a move on! And

don't stop until you get there!"

The younger boy sprinted past Houston, like he finally understood the quicker they got gone, the sooner they could get back. Might even be a Yankee or two left for them to shoot.

The initial wave of blue attacked the corral in groups of forty or so and got bloodied bad. Charley figured the Texans gave back way more lead than was sent their way. Wallace confirmed the Yanks were hit hard.

But then they surged again. Bless the Lord, their mini balls fell short or flew overhead. Again, they retreated, dragging their wounded.

Yet not a defender had been hit, much less killed.

In the following quiet, the Colonel suggested a counter attack, but the Major convinced him to hold the position. The winning argument—appeared to Charley—boiled down to the five thousand bales of Confederate cotton that needed to be protected.

The fallback position remained if needed.

"Here they come again." Someone hollered.

Hitting the dirt, Charley laid his rifle on the bottom rail but waited until the men in front drew closer. At a hundred paces out, he picked a grizzled looking vet. Kill the leaders, and the shave tails will break and run. He'd heard that more than once. Aiming, he squeezed the trigger. The man fell.

Charley pulled the rifle back, rolled onto his back, and reloaded. Lightning fast, he got her done and revolved back over. He threw his weapon on the rail again and found the next one.

For better than an hour, the Yankees charged, then finally as the sun dipped below the horizon, their bugler sounded retreat. Charley allowed himself a smile. They'd done it. For that day anyway. A moan pulled his eyes to the right. The Major sat in the corral's dust with his back to the rail.

Holding a bloody hand on his right leg, he tried to stop the bleeding, but dark blood stained the gray britches from hip to shin already.

The curse word got to Charley's teeth. He gritted them though to keep the thing in, refused it voice. He jumped to his feet then pointed at the closest group congratulating themselves.

"Couple of you men come help me here. We need to get the Major back to the Plaza."

Other than that first groan, Wallace Rusk didn't utter a word, not until the doc pronounced the thigh bone shattered.

"Here take a big swig of this. I got to get it off."

Wallace took a big drink from the bottle then grabbed the man's coat. "I'll break your neck if you so much as scratch my leg."

“Sir, there’s nothing else I can do. The bone’s shattered. It’ll never heal.”

The Major looked to Charley. “Get me to San Antonio.”

“Yes, sir. But you don’t figure on riding, do you?”

“No, hitch four horses to a wagon, and let’s get gone.”

Charley looked to the doctor. “How much of that stuff you got?”
He pointed to the pint bottle Wallace had been sipping on.

“Five more.”

“Good.” He patted his uncle’s hand. “I’ll be back.”

Heading off, he found the three men of his squad still in Laredo and got the wagon ready. Leaving out at night wasn’t his idea of smart, but if Wallace Rusk ordered him to it, then... He allowed himself a shrug.

“Keep him alive, Lord. Give us safe passage.”

The moon, not quite full, but bright enough to travel by, shone through the few high clouds drifting by that night. He hated leaving with the Yankees still out there, and not knowing where.

But if Houston and Bart found Levi, then there shouldn’t be much of a threat. He kept the team at an easy lope, six mile an hour pace he figured.

The Major slept through most of the night, only waking up to nurse on the medicine the doc gave him.

Mid-morning, he made the Dillery ranch and traded his spent team for a fresh one. The settler added a gallon jug of home brew to the bargain. Though he didn’t say a word while there, once awake and on the road again, Wallace moaned and groaned with each bump and jostle.

About broke Charley’s heart for this to happen to his partner. He had a few fond memories of the Comanche, but other than those, most all his good ones included Wallace Rusk.

He understood the man not wanting his leg cut off, not if there was any way to save it, but it sure might come to it.

That night, he reined the team to a stop in the plaza in front of the General’s quarters. The man himself flanked, by his clerk, rushed out. Soon Charley helped the growing crowd get Wallace inside.

Once their doc went to working on his leg, he found his Uncle Henry and came to attention.

The great man hung his head through the telling of his reason for being back.

“Some said a thousand, but the Major and I figured around two hundred Yankees attacked. We repelled them. My partner didn’t get hit until the third and last charge, right before dark.”

“What about Colonel Baylor?”

“We sent Houston and Bart to get them at first sight of the

bluecoats.”

“But you don’t know for sure of their outcome?”

“No, sir. The Major refused flat out to let the Laredo doc cut his leg off and ordered me to bring him here.”

His uncle nodded. “You did good, Son. My surgeon says he has a chance, but the leg may still have to come off.” The General stepped closer and put his hand on his shoulder. “You did real good, Charley. Now get some rest.”



Lacey Rose woke that next morning—or was it afternoon?—the twenty-first day of March in 1864 to the sound of the street’s hustle and bustle outside her hotel window.

If she’d known about the man she’d wanted to be her father getting his thigh bone shattered over two thousand miles away, things would have been so different.

But in her ignorance, life couldn’t be grander.

Like Jack said, Harold was the best. He’d fleeced the big guns, and they never suspected a thing. She especially liked it that she didn’t have to palm a cold deck after all.

Her playing the cards he dealt her was one thing, but having to switch decks without looking, entirely another. Allowing herself a few more minutes in the feather bed, she went over what all needed doing.

Finally, she swung her legs over and stretched. Guess time had come to get packed; had a train to catch.

Albany to Fort Edwards then on to Glen Falls. Twenty-two hours sound like pretty good time.

Couldn’t complain though even if it took twice as long. Traveling first class was the only way to live.

As always, she waited to be the last off, letting the shoe clerks and crumbums jostle each trunk, carpetbag, and box. Those in such a big hurry could hustle on home is what Jack said. She was in no rush.

To her surprise, Longstreet—who’d traveled ahead—stood on the station’s platform, holding a bouquet of flowers. “Hey, sweetness. You’re looking quite lovely. How was your trip?”

“Sir.” She lifted her chin. “I’m afraid you have me confused with some other weary traveler.”

“No mistake.” He smiled and held out his gift. “We’re not playing here.”

She took the offering. “Why’d we come then?”

“You’ll see. Come on. I’ve a carriage waiting.”

An hour later, she did see. Winding up a beautiful road through the woods, a huge rock and timber house came into view.

Nestled in the lush forest of trees she couldn't name, but loved, its grandness almost took her breath away. Mountains guarded its back, like Jack was supposed to guard hers. Except...so far, she hadn't needed him one time.

Could she make it without him? Maybe the time to launch off on her own had come.

"It's lovely, Harold. But...why have you brought me here?"

"You'll see. Do hurry along. My driver will bring our things."

Acting practically giddy, he jumped out first then extended his hand toward her. Strange to see an old man behaving in such a manner. She took it, but once grounded, when he tried to keep it, pulled it back to herself.

Soon, just he and she stood in the big center room. Wow. The ceilings went almost to Heaven they rose so tall.

And huge windows, as big as those in a fancy hotel, comprised the back wall, looking out onto nature.

She grinned. "I still have that Derringer in my purse."

"I know. As well as we both know you're not going to shoot me or anyone else."

"Don't be so certain, sir. Corner a stray cat, and anything is liable to happen."

"You, my dear, are no stray. You are safe here, Lacey. No one would ever be allowed to put you in a corner in this place."

"And where is here? Exactly?"

"Glen Falls."

"So why have we come?"

"I needed a break. Figured you did, too."

"Then why not stay in Albany? Or press on to Saint Louis? This seems a long ride to get out to the middle of the woods." She strolled to the windows.

The driver brought in another load of her belongings. Once finished, Harold, spoke in the man's ear, gave him some cash then busied himself kindling a fire. After it caught, he joined her by the window, keeping a respectful distance.

She faced him. "It is beautiful, but it's --"

"Home." He nodded toward an overstuffed chair close to the fireplace. "Have a seat, won't you?"

An older man carried a tray in set with tea. He set it on a table and left without a word.

She complied, studying the portrait hanging over the mantle as she moved to the chair. "Who's that man?"

"My caretaker. He'll return shortly. His wife is preparing our supper."

"And in the painting?"

"My grandfather."

"Then this is your home? Where you live?"

"It is."

"And do your servants live here as well?"

"No, ma'am. They have a cottage a half mile or so south of us."

"And is that your carriage?"

He nodded. "You and I have one more stop before arriving in Saint Louis on the seventh, a fair-sized game in Philadelphia, but..." He exhaled, cleared his throat, then smiled. "Do you like my home?"

"I do. Yes, very much." She didn't like him being so flustered, so unusual for him. Either he had bad news or...had he heard from Jack? Serve the toady right if something awful had happened. Leaving her on a lie.

Probably trying to double deal before his fingers were ready. Was he dead?

"Would you like it to be yours as well?"

"What?" Not about Jack at all, his question shocked her. She studied his not-so-poker face.

The man looked plum silly. "Your home, Lacey Rose."

The magnitude of what he was asking dawned on her. She pushed back and bit her bottom lip. A false tell she'd been working on.

"You don't have to bite your lip. Remember? I'm the one who told you to do that." He smiled.

She returned the gesture, more uncomfortable by each tick of the grandfather clock. "Spell it out, Mister Longstreet. Tell me exactly what you're talking about. And please, leave nothing to speculation."

"Would you have me get on one knee? I'm willing if you'll tell me ahead of time I'll get a yes."

"Don't ask yet then; let me think on it."

"You don't love Jack, and he'll never marry you."

She studied the fire as its flames grew. Sitting by a blaze, watching it dance, she thoroughly enjoyed. Never got to do much sitting back home, especially by a nice fire. For sure, she didn't love Jack. That was true enough.

Not the way she still loved Charley, but he was just kin, and... She faced Harold. "Did Jack say something to you? About not wanting to marry me?"

"No, but he's already married. Told me you'd met her the morning after he got his hands busted up."

"Yes, she was in his bed alright, and naked as a newborn, but he said she was his ex-wife. Are they still married?"

"While I hate being the bearer of bad news, yes, dear. Indeed they are. They have a weird sort of love-hate relationship from what I've seen. He..." Harold held his hand up "Forget I said anything. This isn't

about him. It's about us. Right this minute, you've paid back the thousand and covered all expenses and have seventeen hundred forty-seven dollars and change due."

"You keep good books. I can sure say that about you, sir."

"But that's a pittance compared to what you can have. I'm fifty-four years old. At most, I might enjoy another ten, maybe twenty more years. You'll still be a young woman. And a very rich widow. Think about that. Still plenty of your life left to live, and all the money you'd ever need."

She closed her eyes. Before Jack tricked her into the trip, she would have sworn on a stack of Bibles she loved him...and him her. But now...being Mis'ess Longstreet had a certain ring to it. "I don't love you, Harold."

"I not only understand your repugnance, especially after the way...uh...under the circumstances of our first meeting. Hopefully, these last few weeks, I've lessened your initial reaction. I'm not foolish enough to think I might win your heart, Lacey, but I do hope you might come to care for me at least a bit. We're good together, and --"

"What about you? Do you..."

He shook his head slightly. "I'm not sure if I love you, or if it's more the fact you're so much like my Myra. I do know I enjoy the pleasure of your company immensely. You're intelligent, very beautiful, and quite an accomplished poker player. I'd be proud to have you at my side, on my arm."

Her mother's sawed board house with Jean Paul flashed through her mind's eye. Nice enough but on Buckmeyer property. The many places she'd lived in with Jack followed. She could do worse.

First class all the way. The old man proved himself a marvel at the poker table. Polite, well mannered, articulate....

"Why do you cheat at cards?"

He chuckled. "I hate to lose."

"Who doesn't?" She giggled, pleased for a little break in tension that filled the huge room.

"Talked to a soldier once who'd fought at Bunker Hill." He shrugged. "Said he was never so scared or alive in his whole life. Remarked that he hated missing the War of 1812. Guess it's kind of like that. I love fleecing a mark, some wise guy who's full of himself. There's a certain thrill."

She knew exactly what he talked about, but only on the scared part. The cash proved to be the only joy she derived from cheating at cards. Well, and after it was over. She solely loved those times the best. When she knew it would be several days before she had to perform, lie, and cheat again.

"Just how much money do you have?"

“Is that a yes?”

“Not yet. I’m still pondering. Answer my question.”

“Over two hundred thousand in this county, another fifty or so overseas.”

“Why?”

“My darling, what we do is illegal. If I have to run, I’d need a grubstake.”

Well, that made sense. Except she hated thinking of herself as a common criminal, though truth was still truth. Seemed that’s exactly what she’d become. A lawless felon, except Harold Longstreet was the king.

And he was asking her to be his queen.

“What about children? Do you want babies?”

He shook his head. “Not particularly. I certainly wouldn’t require them, but if you do, why not?”

“I suppose one day....”

“Traveling with a nannie might be difficult. Not impossible though, and it would enhance the tale you tell.”

“Would I have my own money?”

“Darling, you can have it all.”

She went back to studying the fire, but it held no answers. Facing him again, she studied his face. “Let me sleep on it. I’ll tell you my heart’s decision in the morning.”

The older gentleman returned; a white towel hung over his arm. “Supper is served, sir.”

Chapter Eleven

Scouts brought word of the Cavalry's rout to San Antonio the day after the victory in Laredo, but Charley couldn't find it in himself to celebrate.

Even their report of the Yanks leaving a trail of discarded equipment and blood signs didn't bolster his foul mood. The surgeon couldn't save Wallace's leg.

And as yet, Uncle Henry hadn't been able to talk him into letting the doc cut it off.

"Sergeant Nightingale, the general has need of you." Uncle's clerk sure put on airs.

Charley set his mug down and stood. "He say what for?"

"No, but he requested your presence, post haste."

Though he followed the man out of the mess hall, he passed him on the way to headquarters. Only so much dawdling a man could take. He found the General in his office, came to attention, and saluted.

"You wanted me, sir?"

"Yes, Son. The stage leaves in an hour. Take Wallace home."

"Sir, is that a good idea?"

"No, but the stubborn oaf refuses the amputation, and he begged me to send him home. Asked if I could spare you."

"Doc got plenty of that medicine?"

"Yes, and whiskey. Give Wallace all he wants. And doc's sending bandages." Henry handed over four Double Eagles. "That should be enough. Buy him two seats if he needs them."

"Yes, sir."

Besides Wallace and his medicine, Henry loaded Charley down with all the mail not posted, and a bear hug.

It'd been a long while since the man had acted like an uncle...way too long. Charley hated this war, had from that first dust up.

Even with the room separating them, Harold heard the first whining moan in the middle of the night. The second drove him to her door. The third, louder and more urgent, convinced him to open it, but the handle wouldn't turn.

“Lacey?” He rapped lightly with one knuckle. “Are you alright?”

Receiving no response, he sprinted to his room to retrieve the master. He stopped again at her room and listened, but heard nothing. Was she sick? Or just a bad dream? Should he fetch the doctor?

No, he hated the thought of leaving her alone. Another whinny moan sounded.

By the fifth, he inserted the key. Knocking again, louder that time, he rose his voice. “Lacey Rose! I’m coming in.”

After a quick peek, he walked in and stood beside her bed. All twisted up in her covers, she struggled and flailed the air. “Please! Don’t go.” Her sleep talking faded to a whisper. “Come back.” She reached up, grabbed him, pulled him to herself, and kissed him hard. “Oh, Charley! You came for me!”

Harold kissed her back then eased to one knee and stroked her hair until she calmed. He stayed with her until her breathing slowed.

The same little sleep puffs started—the ones she’d made that night he’d wormed his way into her bed. He wanted to stay, but not being that Charley guy, he’d rather not jeopardize his bargain.

The more he thought about it that night and the next morning while he waited for her to rise, it pleased him she dreamed of Charley—whatever he was—instead of Jack. For such a bad dream and poor night’s sleep, she looked remarkably radiant that morning.

Must have been the chill in the air.

He jumped to his feet and held her chair. “Coffee black with honey, right?”

She sat then raised slightly as he scooted the chair in. “Yes, please, and thank you for remembering. We haven’t taken too many meals together.”

Pouring her cup full, he added the honey then set it in front of her. “True, but that can change if...”

More than anything, he wanted to ask for her decision. Took the chair across from her, and started to, but he hated the idea of it being a no so bad...he just stared with what he hoped were lovesick, puppy dog eyes.



Lacey Rose sipped her coffee and avoided looking his way. So pitiful. Poor thing. Bad form to laugh at the first man who’d proposed. Her boys didn’t count. “Here’s what I’ve decided.”

She pulled her bottom lip in somewhat to tease him, but more, she wanted a few more heartbeats to be certain of her decision.

“Spit it out, girl.” His eyes flashed, a bit of temper she’d not seen before.

“Yes, sir.” She matched his tone and volume, adding a touch of snitz.

“Sorry. Though I hate to admit it, I’ve been anxious. Please, won’t you continue?”

“Of course. First, I want to thank you for not taking advantage of me last night, and for filling in for Charley.”

He nodded, but didn’t seem too pleased with her delay. “My pleasure. Please get to it. Your decision?”

“I want to see Jack first. I’m thinking I’ll be more mad than happy when I do. If I am, I say we pay the scumbag his cut then find us a judge...or a preacher. Whichever you please.”

He snickered, then his entire face broke into a giant grin. He stuck out his hand. “Deal.”

She held her hand back. “What happened to the one knee?”

He slipped out of his chair and knelt in front of her. “Lacey Rose, will you be my wife?”

“Yes. Yes, I will. With sincere inclination, I’d like to add. And of course, with the afore mentioned stipulation.”

He stood and extended both hands. “How about we seal our new deal with a kiss?”

She let him pull her to her feet, then held her ground as he gently pressed his lips to hers. She scooped in a little and kissed him back. He wrapped her in a bear hug, but not too tight. She let him go on for a bit then put her hands on his chest and eased him back.

“I do like the way you kiss, sir.”

He smiled. “And I like everything about you.”

“Sit down and tell me about yourself, especially where all the money is hidden.”

“Fair request. But first, won’t you please tell me about this Charley in your dreams.”



An extra deep pit jolted the coach something awful. Wallace gritted his teeth, then forced his good eye open. A Charley-sized blur sat next to him holding onto his arm. “Where are we, Son?”

“Almost there. Chester and Jean Paul met us at the stage.”

“Good. Hand me that bottle.”

“You sure? Told me a ways back, you wanted your wits when we got there.”

He patted the boy’s leg. “You’re right, but best give it to me anyway. I need a little sip. Wouldn’t want the ladies to get the wrong impression.”

“Yes, sir.”

The boy handed over the pint bottle. Wallace only slugged one gulp. Of late, been taking three to put him out. If his leg hurt any worse, he might cut the thing off himself.

"Give me strength, Lord. Let me see her one last time before you take me home."

"Amen."

He looked over and smiled. "I love you, Boy."

"I know. I love you, too, Uncle."

"We still partners?"

"Yes, sir. Always."

"Promise me then. No matter what. Do not let them cut off my leg."

"Yes, sir. Already have promised, but you rest assured, I'll never let them. No matter what Aunt Rebecca or Aunt May or anyone says. I will not let them."

"Good." He nodded toward the bag where the whiskey and laudanum hid. "Give me the whiskey bottle. How far now?"

Charley complied then looked out the surrey's window, "About another mile. We just passed the smoke house."

Wallace pulled the cork and swallowed a good gulp. "Keep that stuff handy. Once I kiss my wife, I figure I'll need a good pull on both of them."

"Yes, sir."

Whoever was driving slowed the team and rounded the last corner before the big house. Wallace loved the place, always figured he and Rebecca would live there once Henry built his mansion on the Llano, but short of a miracle, that wasn't going to happen.

Hated leaving her. He stiffened his back.

The team slowed and finally came to a complete stop. Charley jumped out, then came around and opened the door. Wallace grabbed hold of the boy's extended forearm and climbed down.

He hung on there for a second as his bride ran to him, tears streaming down her face.

"Oh, Wallace! Why didn't you—"

He kissed her quiet. "I love you so much. Best get me to bed. I don't think I can stand much longer." His good knee buckled, but strong hands grabbed him.

His littlest partner lifted him like a sleeping child and carried him inside to Henry's bed. He started to protest, but sweet darkness engulfed him as Rebecca worked on getting his clothes off.



Charley sat at the kitchen table while Aunt May read Uncle

Henry's latest letter to her babies, except Crockett and Charlotte had shot up since the last time he'd seen them. Didn't even seem like babies anymore.

Horrible war had stolen so much from everyone. He hardly recognized his little cousins.

Miss Jewel hustled into the room with his aunt hot on her heels. Both glared, sending daggers his way, but Rebecca was the one who spoke up.

"Wallace said you were under orders to stop us from taking that leg. That between the both of you, we couldn't have it."

"That's right, Auntie. I gave him my word."

Rebecca sat next to him and took his hand into hers. "Now, Charley. You listen to me, and listen well. You need to help your uncle. Help me. You've got to understand that he's not in his right mind. Now Miss Jewel says we might still save him. But the leg has got to go. That's all there is to it. You do understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Charley, you cannot let my husband die."

"But it isn't right."

"What do you mean by that? Of course, I'm right!"

He filled his lungs, blew it all out, then faced her.

"That first day, the doc in Laredo wanted to take it. He said there's nothing to do but amputate. But he wouldn't let him. I'm telling you true. Your pa argued with him—over and again—until he finally give up and told me to get him home. So, you see, ma'am, Uncle's in the same mind he's had all along, and I gave him my word."

Tears welled then overflowed, wetting her cheeks then her dress. He wrapped his arm around her, but she pushed back and glared at him through blood-shot eyes.

"Why!" She stood and twirled on him. "Did he tell you his reason? It makes no sense! All I could get out of him was because he loved me." She went to the window and stood there, her back to all. "That's no reason to die."

"That's it, Auntie. It's what he told me, too. Plain and simple, it's because he loves you so much. Can't stand the thought of saddling you with a cripple."

Facing the ceiling, she shook her head. "Oh, merciful Father in Heaven!"

Aunt May joined her. She draped an arm around Rebecca's shoulder and hugged her tight. "Stubborn pride kills many a man, my sweet."

"It's crazy talk! Doesn't want to strap me with a cripple, so he'd rather die? I hate that! Why would he want to leave me a widow?"

Charley nodded. "Got to admit, doesn't sound so logical coming from you."

"There's nothing logical about this whole horrible situation!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Didn't figure there was any reason to add the part about Wallace knowing all along he'd loved her way more than she ever cared for him.

His partner's words echoed in his heart. 'I just wore her down, Son. Never let up; I couldn't. She's been a fine wife, the best kind, and I loved that woman enough for the both of us to live a lifetime on, but not as a cripple.'

The last thing he said though...Charley would never forget.

'Now she'll be at liberty to love again. Maybe her true soulmate will come around.'

The women returned to their seats, and the debate around the table continued.

Again and again he assured them all, he would not allow anyone to cut on his partner. Finally, he'd heard more than enough. He stood and glanced at each one before speaking.

"I know it's hard. Isn't easy for no one. But a man's word is his bond. I'll not break mine. No matter what any of you say."

Marching out, he headed straight into Henry's bedroom. Wallace slept peacefully. Charley lifted one of the wingbacks out of his uncle's library and set it softly next to the bed. He eased down into it.

Shortly, sleep found him, but not the deep kind that did a man good. Instead, he slumbered through the hair trigger, don't-try-to-sneak-up-on-me kind.

He'd given his word and meant to keep it.

Chapter Twelve

“Charley, wake up.”

He pried one eye open. May stood in front of him, holding a cup of coffee; seemed he’d slept the night through. “Morning, Auntie.”

“Here.” She handed him the mug. “Let me tend to Wallace. Miss Jewel has breakfast and a bath ready. Do you a world of good.”

He took the coffee then eased up, careful not to spill the hot liquid. “Thank you. He only woke once, but Aunt Rebecca saw to him that time.”

“I know. She’s in the kitchen now.”

Didn’t much cotton to a real bath, but washing up some sounded reasonable.

Once clean with a fresh shirt, he moseyed on to the kitchen, grabbed a plate and went to heaping it full with biscuits slathered with cream gravy and a nice slab of fried ham. She’d scrambled his eggs just like he liked them, and before he needed it, a tall glass of sweet milk materialized.

How he had missed Miss Jewel’s cooking. He grinned. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She returned the nod but not the smile.

He avoided looking at his Aunt Rebecca while he wolfed down the best breakfast he’d had since leaving that very table. Once finished, he washed and rinsed his plate, dried it, then put it away. He’d taken too many meals here not to honor his uncle’s rules.

“Charley, I need a word with you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He followed May to the front porch. She took the smaller rocker, and he sat in Henry’s.

She handed him an opened envelope. “I’ve only showed this to Chester before today.”

He pulled out the letter.

Greetings Mrs. Buckmeyer,

Each day from noon until one, on the 8th to the 10th of April, I will make myself available in the lobby of the Hampton hotel in Saint Louis, Missouri. Send your man Chester or Lacey’s step-father, with five thousand in gold, and I’ll inform you of the whereabouts of Wallace Rusk’s and Sassy Baylor’s namesake. Tell him to ask the clerk for the room number to the King of Diamonds. We’ll proceed from there. Send a Pinkerton man, or

anyone else, and...well... you'll never see the half-breed again.

Until then,

King

P.S. Tell Laura her baby girl has bloomed into a lovely young lady, but alas, she has fallen into sordid company. Without my intervention, I'm afraid her future appears bleak.

Charley handed the note back. "I thought she was going to find Bear Fang's people."

"So did we, but apparently, she got waylaid."

"Jean Paul going?"

"No, I don't think he could talk her into coming home."

"Why not?"

May leaned back and looked off.

Shortly she rocked forward and turned toward him. "She ran off the very night she got your letter, dear. I don't think she'll come back if anyone but you fetches her."

Tears welled. Why had he written that stupid letter? He'd ruined Lacey Rose's life. His, too. Hadn't a day or night gone by he hadn't thought of her kissing him. She was so much more than just kin, and he needed to tell her. Beseech her to come home. "Oh, Lord."

"What?"

"I can't go. I promised Uncle Henry I'd come back. The Yankees are in Brownsville, and they already attacked Laredo once. Far as I know, they could be marching on San Antonio as we speak."

Gasping, she placed her hand on her heart and bowed her head. "Father God in Heaven, faithful protector, dispatch your angels to keep our men safe. Rout the enemy and chase them all the way out of Texas. In Jesus' name. Amen." She looked up and took his hand. "We thought you might say as much."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm still a soldier with a duty."

She stood and pretended to help him to his feet, pulling on his hand. "Come on with me. Your commanding officer wants a word."

He rose, but the 'we' stuck in his craw. Seemed to him the woman had been plotting against him and his partner.

She marched through her husband's library all the way to his bed. Rebecca sat in a straight-backed chair, where the wingback had been before, holding Wallace's hand.

"Major."

Rebecca shook him. "Dearest."

Wallace opened his eyes. "Hey, Son. Thank you for saving my leg. But now you've got new orders. Go get my girl."

"Sir?"

"You heard me. I am ordering you to go get my baby and

approving extended leave to get this personal problem resolved—however long it takes. Get her back home, Son.”

Charley looked at May, who nodded, then back to Wallace. “Yes, sir. I will, sir. I’ll bring her home.”

He stayed by the bed until his partner gulped another slug of relief and closed his eyes. May slipped her hand into his and tugged. He hung on until she let go at the first wingback.

Continuing on to his uncle’s chair. She reached down, pulled out a drawer, and set a leather money belt on the desk.

“There’s eight hundred and twenty in gold with another sixty-three in silver. Once this King of Diamonds man brings you to Lacey, and only then, give him five hundred. That’s the last amount we offered for information leading to her return. Be careful with the rest.”

“I will, Aunt May.”

“This man sounds like he knows Lacey, but that doesn’t mean he has her. There’s no telling where you might have to go.”

Charley nodded. “Yes, ma’am. However long it takes.”

“I know you’ve seen how our menfolk do things. You act accordingly with this scoundrel, but bring Lacey home even if she plans on leaving again. She owes her mama that.” She took a deep breath and tapped on the bag as if trying to remember something. “Send word when you can. The mail from the north gets through now and again. We’ll be wondering...and praying.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will.” He ran his finger around the inside of his collar. He hated to ask, but had the need in case the women cooked all this up. “Miss Jewel have any idea how much longer Wallace has?”

“She said as strong as he is, could be three or four more days, but you best not wait.”

“What about his leg?”

“You don’t have to worry, dear. It’s too late. The gangrene has spread, moved into his torso. Wouldn’t do him any good, not now.”

Charley hated it all to blue blazes and back, but hanging around to cry over his uncle’s grave wouldn’t get Lacey Rose home. “I can be ready to leave in twenty minutes if Uncle Chester or whoever you want could take me to town.”



The maid poured in more hot water. Lacey stuck her finger in and smiled at the girl. “Perfect, thank you.”

Once the door closed, she dropped her robe and slipped into the fragrant bath. In her ignorance, her life lived out near perfect.

The war really hadn’t affected her. No shattered leg bones to fret over or loved ones who were dying right before her eyes. No hardship

whatsoever. She scooched a bit deeper, wiggled her toes and waved the water with her hands.

The warmth pulled any and all misgivings from her soul. Going to Saint Louis was a waste of time.

During the ride from Glen Falls to Philadelphia, the thought had gained steam. She'd decided on Harold—or rather the life he could give her. Women married men for reasons other than love from the very first. Nothing wrong with it. So why shouldn't she?

Rebekah in the Bible agreed to marry Isaac without ever laying eyes on the man.

Those ten camels loaded with bride goods and the gold Abraham's servant tossed around like it was copper didn't miss her notice. Anyone could say what they wanted about God, but no one would convince Lacey that her Biblical counterpart hadn't married the patriarch for his wealth and status.

Turned out not so bad, too, ending up being the grandmother of all the Jews.

She held up her finger and examined the ring Harold had brought her their last day together. Gold band with a beautiful, gaudy emerald encased in sparkling little diamonds. She loved it all the way to the stars and back.

After that night's game, she'd tell him of her decision. New York or even London sounded nice.

Oh, the stories Bonnie told of that trip to Europe. That's what she needed to do. Get away. Get Harold to take her across the pond. She said it again out loud. "Across the pond." She giggled then slipped all the way under the water.

Best start thinking more like Alexandra and less like Lacey Rose.

The game that night was supposed to be almost as big as Albany's. She pushed herself up and tilted her chin. "No, you may not call me Lexi. Miss Paulos is acceptable if Alexandra is too long for you to wrap your tongue around." She pouted her bottom lip as though perhaps she'd been too hard on the peasant.

Giggling, she lathered up the soap and got serious with her preparations.

The king and his coming queen did it again.

As usual, she excused herself at midnight. Harold could beat that bunch straight up, but he always liked to give some back to anyone that he'd taken a liking to. Keeping an eye on the lobby, she waited in the back of his hotel's bar.

No less than five galoots offered her a drink—and more—with their winks and grins.

Men. Such cads...every one! Well, except those of the household she grew up in. She would never have guessed all the rest weren't like

them...honest, trustworthy, and faithful.

Man, had she learned a lot in the few years!

A little after the lobby's big clock struck two, he strolled in like the king he was. She wanted to jump up and run to him, tell him her news, walk with him all the way to his room, but made herself wait to follow and watched.

He moseyed to the stairs and started up, but looked around the lobby like he might be waiting for someone. At two in the morning?

What was he up to?

A man she didn't recognize came in and sulked in the corner's shadows obviously watching her Harold. He disappeared down a far hall.

She paid her tab then hurried toward the stairs. The stranger reappeared. Walking by, he didn't look at her face, but studied her hand as though she might have her room number tattooed on it.

Hurrying up the stairs, even though the man didn't follow her up, she tapped Harold's room door with her foot twice and kept walking.

On reaching the next, she turned, whistled softly, then hurried inside his open door.

"Well, isn't this a pleasant surprise?"

Her grin probably said it all...what she'd decided, but first things first. She came close. "How'd we do?"

"Sixteen fifty-three. I returned enough for train fare to that drummer across from you."

"One of the things I admire about you, Harold." She winked then grinned, stretched, and put her lips to his. Not a passionate kiss, but one she hoped showed she cared. "I've decided I don't want to go to Saint Louis. Why not London instead?"

His eyes opened wide and the expression of joy and relief on his face warmed her. "It's wet and chilly this time of year, but the French Riviera... that's the place to be."

Her lips spread wide. "Even better. Let's get married in New York, then catch us a clipper to Europe. What do you say?"

"Are you certain? I thought you wanted to see Jack first. And I did give him my word I'd have you in Saint Louis on the seventh."

"He's wicked! Tricking me and selling me off. What if you hadn't been you? In my humble opinion, the man's a lying buffoon. If you're compelled to send him a note, fine. But I certainly won't send him one thin dime of my take. He already got the five hundred plus the same amount in his past due note. He doesn't deserve that after what he did."

"If you're sure."

"I'd rather he not know what became of us. Serve him right for how he treated your new wife."

A monstrous smile divided his face in two. "I love you the way you think, baby girl."

She kept her smile, but it nicked her heart that he used Wallace Rusk's pet name for her. What was her uncle doing? She hoped he'd not seen much action. A little shudder ran up her spine.

Still, that was her old life. A whole new one lay before her, and her heart was ready to embark on it.

"Do you like Lacey Rose?"

"I love you, sweetheart."

"No. I was thinking...maybe I should change it. Not Alexandra. Jack dreamed that one up. Got any ideas, other than Myra?"

He chuckled. "You're Lacey Rose to me. Let's leave it alone. There's a couple of other dodges we can try. Besides, now that it's settled, I don't want my wife traveling alone. No more aliases."

She kissed him softly again. "Good. We could even find us another partner. I'm getting better. You said so yourself."

"Perhaps, but I'm feeling rather tired, darling. Should I see you to your room, or..."

"Are you a man of honor, Harold Longstreet?"

"Totally. With you, sweetheart. What do you have in mind?"

"If you'll promise to not try anything, I'll stay here tonight. There was a strange man in the lobby after you came up, and I don't want you having to go all the way to my hotel if you're so tired."

He nodded, then extended his hand. "I promise. Come on. We need to be up and at 'em in the morning. I'd like to catch the first train east."



Charley made Memphis on the second of April, found a steamer going to Saint Louis, and bought himself a berth on the lowest deck. His parents had water closets bigger than his room, but he wasn't on holiday.

Compared to sleeping under the stars with only his saddle for a pillow, the bed proved pure luxury.

Even slept solid through that first night; didn't know a thing until he opened his eyes the next morning. Man, how long had it been?

If he dreamed, he didn't remember; but woke stiff and sore. All that bouncing on the stage had taken its toll.

After chow—two bits worth of worse-than-army food—he strolled the deck. Once he tired of watching the big wheel splash the muddy water, he returned to his room. Bored there, on a whim, he took the stairs down to the boiler room. He knew the basics of how a steamer worked, but thought he'd check it out.

To his surprise, the thing looked almost just like the one Elijah

Eversole had built for his father's and Uncle Henry's saw mill. He watched a bit, then grabbed an oversized shovel, and got in line.

Took his first three tosses to get loose, another two to break a good sweat. After ten, he figured either he might as well find the straw boss and see if he could draw wages.

The man took his name and room number and claimed he'd talk to the purser.

Nothing came of it, and Charley didn't venture back down to the boiler room. So pleased to arrive in Saint Louis on the seventh of April, he practically cheered.

Boredom about did him in on that trip, but he'd spent a lot of hours planning on what he'd say when he saw Lacey.

His nerves crawled all over him like red ants on Comanche prey tied in the sun, slathered with molasses or sorghum; as nervous about seeing her as a rabbit in a trap. But why? He'd thought he'd made up his mind. Was it guilt or love? Hard to tell.

No, not so hard. He remembered the kiss.

If she was there like that King of Diamonds claimed, he could be back in San Antonio before the month was out. Maybe even have time for a wedding. That's what he should have done.

Told her his heart, not for her to think of him as just kin. How stupid could one man be?

Chapter Thirteen

Fanning to the next newspaper page, he looked over its top at the lobby's big clock. Half past noon.

Jack scanned the various and sundry stories, hunting a better sounding name. Spade was tarnished.

That man had been caught cheating at cards, dealing off the bottom, then like a slaver, sold his Lacey Rose—most likely the best thing that had ever happened to him—to Longstreet.

Oh, well. He shook his head. Shame things turned out like they did. He could have been happy with the gal for another year, maybe longer.

A young man walked in, but headed straight to the bar. Didn't even bother stopping at the desk. Jack returned to his search.

Soon as he got his gold, he was heading east since he definitely didn't want to go through the South. He'd catch himself the fastest clipper in the New York harbor and get himself around the Horn to California.

The gold and silver strikes might have played out, but the new rich loved losing at poker.

Maybe he'd go to San Francisco. He'd read the money grew on trees in the city by the bay. Three months on board would give him ample time to get his fingers ready.

At two sharp, he stood. Should've specified one to two, not noon. He leaned back, stretching his back then headed out. Two blocks over and one up, he walked into the dive where he'd rented a room.

Ignoring the game in progress, he bellied up to the bar and threw his chin at the man behind the rough planks. "Beer."

"Make that two."

Jack glanced to his left. The same young man he'd seen before grinned at him. "Do I know you?"

"No, sir. Where's Lacey?"

Ah, so the whippersnapper was the one May Buckmeyer sent. He turned. "Who are you?"

"Name is Charles Nightingale. Now where's Lacey?"

"Got my gold?"

"Would I come without your reward, sir?" The boy raised his shirt, exposing a money belt. "Right here. It's yours once I see her."

"Fair enough." The barkeep put two frothy mugs down. "Drink

your beer, then we'll go fetch Miss Lacey Rose."



Charley put a silver dollar on the rough plank, but didn't touch the beer. Keep your wits about you in a scrape. A fly flutter might mean the difference. All of them advised him that more than once.

Stories had been told of both Levi and Wallace getting soaked, but he'd never seen either take more than a single drink in a day.

While the dandy gulped the liquid courage, Charley swirled the brew, sloshing a bit of foam. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a bit of gray edging the man's sleeve.

Though he'd never seen one, he'd heard about hideout guns. That might be the very day he would if he was right. The guy drained his beer, nodded at the dollar, then smiled.

"She's upstairs. None too happy though. What say we go up and make us a trade?"

Charley held his hand out. "Lead the way."

One flight of stairs, second door on the street side.

How could Lacey have gotten mixed up with that guy?

The dude fumbled with the key then finally got it unlocked. Stepping in, he held the door. Charley followed, but never took his eyes off the man's right hand.

"Where is she?"

"Let me see my gold."

"Not the deal. Now where is Lacey?"

The man slung the door shut and raised his right hand in one motion. Charley grabbed it just as the Derringer slipped out. He squeezed hard. The man squealed like a caught piglet. "Let go."

"Soon as I see Lacey. Where is she?"

"Don't know. He promised to have her here yesterday."

"Who's he?"

"Longstreet. Harold Longstreet."

"Why's he have her? Where'd he take her?" Charley tightened his grip.

"Ow! Stop! Let go!"

"Planning on stealing the gold. Not a wise move, Mister...I don't believe I got your name."

"No, I was... Jack Filley. Please, let go!"

He squeezed harder, a bone crushed.

"Please, don't...She's with Harold Longstreet. I swear. Left with him a month ago. Supposed to be back yesterday!"

"Now we're getting somewhere." He loosened his grip a fraction. "Tell me, where do I find this man?"

“Don’t know.”

Applying more pressure, Charley lowered his head until he was eye level with Jack. “Not good enough.”

“Wait! I’ll tell you what I know, but just let go, please.”

Charley shook until the pocket gun fell to the floor then shoved the gent to the bed and pulled out his knife. “Get to talking.”

With each word, his gut tightened. How could any man do what he’d done to Lacey and sleep with himself? Once out of story, the guy shrugged. “Harold’s got a place in Falls something. Upstate New York, but he doesn’t go until late September or early October, claims autumn’s color is worth the trip.”

“So this man double crossed you?”

The whimpering dandy nodded, cradling his broken hand. “We were partners once. Thought I could trust him with my girl.”

Charley jumped forward and pinned the man on the bed with the edge of his knife against his throat. “Never, ever let Lacey Rose’s name cross your lips again. Much less call her your anything. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Lacey with child?”

“No, sir, I was always careful.” The man’s eyes widened. Would have been comical if Charley didn’t want to kill the idiot. He pushed away, stood, then backed up until he spotted the Derringer. He kicked the pistol to the far corner.

“You ever see me again, you best run the other way.”

“Yes, sir.”

Charley sheathed his knife, opened the door without taking his eyes off the man, then turned and walked out. He waited against the wall two steps over.

Soft moans mixed with sobs drifted through the wall. He didn’t figure the coward wanted a second round. He hustled downstairs and out into the fresh air.

The man’s fear stench about gagged him.

Hmm, what was going to be the best way to get to Albany?



“I liked it, thank you.” Lacey Rose snuggled in tight to Harold’s arm. She’d not worn a heavy enough wrap, and while the packed theater had been rather warm, the wind whipped along Broadway, more than fresh.

“Yes, I always enjoy Shakespeare, especially when it’s done right.”

She had no reference, but that would change once she got to Europe. Everyone touted the London stage as the very best. Hmm, did

they do English plays in France? Who cared? He'd already emptied two of his bank accounts, and tomorrow he intended to book the passage.

She loved being the queen. She squeezed his arm. "Thank you again."

He chuckled. "It wasn't that good."

"No, not just the play. For everything. Making me legal, saving me from Jack, and being so nice."

"Oh, my dear, you have –"

Looking up, she gasped and grasped his arm even tighter. A man with a knife in Harold's mid-section on the other side guided them with his blade into an alley between the theater and the next building. Once there, he sneered then whispered.

"Hand over your money, or I'll slit both of your throats."

Harold eased Lacey behind him with one hand while he reached inside his coat pocket. "Here, have it all." He held out his wallet.

The guy grabbed the leather, flipped it open, took out the greenbacks, then threw it down. "Her purse."

Slipping her hand into her clutch, she found the Derringer, palmed it and removed the pistol, then reached around Harold to hand the man her purse.

"That flashy green ring, lady. Take it off. Yours, too, old man, and your watch."

Lacey stepped from behind her husband's back and held out the pistol. "No, you can't have either. Take our money and git."

"Easy baby, it's not worth it. Give him the ring."

Even in the bit of streetlamp's gas light, she could see the evil glint in the man's eye. He inched closer.

"He's right, baby." He mocked Harold. "You ain't going to shoot me, and we both know it. Now give me the rings, or I'll cut the old man here." His snarl morphed into a wicked grin. "Not two hours ago, I was eating onion with it, too. Ever hear an onion cut'll kill you?"

"So will a bullet, idiot. If you so much as puncture his skin, you get one right between your beady eyes. I was going to let you keep the money, but I've changed my mind. Drop it and leave now."

The thief hesitated as though he couldn't register what she'd said.

She lowered the gun to point at his leg. "I said drop it!" Then squeezed. A flash of light shone bright in the dark alley. The pistol recoiled. The man lunged at Harold. She squeezed again, aimed a few inches higher.

The robber stumbled back holding his leg, glared at her half a heartbeat then ran off limping.

She stepped out and watched him until he ducked into the next alley then turned back. Harold held his stomach with one hand and

steadied himself against the brick wall with the other. "Best we find a doctor, dearest. The thief stabbed me."

"Oh, no! Harold!" She picked up his walking stick and eased him out, then whistled her loudest—the one Harold claimed to be very unladylike, but she didn't care. She needed help.

The scoundrel didn't drop her money, but she had her ring. Her beautiful emerald. Except....

Her call for help brought several theater patrons, then a coach came, and the men helped her and Harold inside. Soon the driver whipped the horses into a gallop.

"In my boots, dear, on the inside there's little pockets that have some gold coins, get enough to pay the driver and give the rest to the doctor, tell him there's plenty more if he needs it."

"Yes, sir." She patted his hand. "You rest. I'll take care of everything."

"Good." He leaned back and closed his eyes.

For a while, she did take care of things.

Paid the driver once he helped her get Harold inside the doctor's house, but the longer the old healer worked on her husband, the more apparent it became that it wasn't going to be a quick in and out with a horror story to tell over drinks.

Before the sun, but not the early risers, the street came to life with vendors hawking newspapers and horses clippety clopping along the brick streets. New York noise she'd become accustomed to. The clock gonged six times. She'd only missed two during the night, and still the doctor had not come out.

Finally, the man appeared and closed the door to his patient room. "Miss Longstreet, your father –"

"Husband. Harold is my husband."

"My mistake. I'm sorry, ma'am, but there's nothing else I can do for him."

She jumped to her feet, suddenly wide awake. The room closed in on her. "What? Why not? He...he hardly bled any at all, just a small spot on his shirt. I was there. Helped you...take it off."

"I know. It actually would have been better if it had, but he's bleeding on the inside, and I can't stop it. Good Lord knows I've tried."

"Do something else. Fix him. You're a doctor."

"True enough, I am, but...I'm not God." He nodded toward the door. "Don't know if he'll wake up, but I'm sorry, ma'am. He won't live through the day."

For two steps, the doctor's words wormed their way into her soul. Her heart stopped, then tried to jump out of her chest. Tears welled, but she blinked them away.

What did this old man know? She sniffed twice, filled her lungs, then marched in. He lay on the table, white as a lily. The tears returned in earnest, filled her eyes then overflowed.

She lay her head on his chest and wept. "Oh, Harold. What have I done?"

He never woke up. Breathed his last a few minutes after the first ray of sunshine broke through the room's east window. She'd told him how grateful she was, but never mentioned what had become so evident.

What difference could it make...that she loved him? Married him for his money then fell into love with the old coot.

Like a warm dress that fit just right, he'd become comfortable, her friend. She should have shot that thief right between the eyes. If only she had, her husband would still be alive. She buried him the next day.

Only her and the undertaker along with the two grave diggers. It rained, but she didn't care.

After they covered the grave, they left.

She knelt there and cried every tear left inside.

What was she going to do?



Confederate General Henry Buckmeyer finished May's letter, refolded it then stuffed it in its envelope and put it in his drawer with all the others.

One fine day, he'd trade them for a solid month of kisses, maybe more. He pulled out the *New York Times* Charley had sent from Saint Louis and May had been so kind to enclose with his and the others' letters.

On the fifth page, he found the article she wanted him to read.

Halfway into the too-wordy commentary, he allowed himself a grin. Why did reporters act like they were paid by the syllable? Perhaps they were. He needed to ask someone. Either way, great news. He slipped out of his chair and knelt.

For the longest he extolled the goodness of God and His tender mercies visiting the sins of the fathers upon the sons in one day.

Only one regret, but not so much in light of this new revelation.

Evening mess couldn't come soon enough, and he wasn't even hungry.

He waited until after all the letters had been talked through. Levi tried a time or two to engage him, but Henry threw him a 'we'll talk later,' and the Colonel let it lie. Once just family remained, he stood. "I have news."

Levi quieted first with Houston the last, as usual. "Something wrong, Pa?"

"No." The last time he'd done this was passing along the sad news of Wallace Rusk's demise. "Charley sent word from Saint Louis. He found the man who wrote the ransom letter, but he didn't have Lacey Rose. However, he knew the man who does, so he's heading east. Remember him in your prayers."

"We should have gone with him, Uncle."

Henry shook his head. "No, Bart. You and Houston need to be here with us. Now Charley did send a Yankee newspaper with a very interesting piece of information. Last month—I forget exactly what day—the Yankees hung two spies in New Orleans."

Levi sat a bit taller. "Anyone we know?"

"Braxton Glover, and his father Bull."

The colonel chuckled. "The Lord works in mysterious ways. Kind of like when he had Israel's enemies turn on each other."

Henry snapped his fingers then pointed at his partner. "Hadn't thought of that, Levi, but you're exactly right." He smiled. "My only regret is that Bull never knew it was us who helped Sofia."

That night, he slept better than he had in a coon's age. Two less enemies. If only he didn't have seven thousand bluecoats in Brownwood who wanted to kill him, his life would be almost grand.

He hated the war, had from the first.

Chapter Fourteen



Lacey sat ramrod straight in the hard-backed chair. She hated waiting, but of late, that's all she'd been doing. A little bell tinkled somewhere. The matron sitting the guard desk smiled—or at least that's how Lacey took it.

“He'll see you now, Miss.”

“It's mis'ess, and thank you, ma'am.” She kept the ‘old biddy’ to herself. For all she knew, the lady was totally different away from the lawyer's office. Working with a bunch of stuffed shirts surely made one grumpy.

The woman ought to be home playing with her grandbabies, if she had any.

Lacey touched her tummy as she walked into the oversized office. Had Harold done his duty in the eight days? She let that thought drift away. Right that minute, she had other issues to attend.

The man looked up from the piece of paper he'd been studying. “Miss Longstreet.” He stood and motioned across his desk to another of the hard-backed chairs exactly like the one in his outer office. “Please.”

Perhaps she was a miss again if that's what they all were calling her. What did one call a widow?

“I married Harold Longstreet two weeks ago yesterday. Last week, he was murdered in an alley off Broadway...in my presence, sir. We'd just come from the theater and...” Her voice failed her.

Stiffening her back, she blinked away tears, and patted her face with her lace-trimmed hankie. The king might be dead, but she still was the queen.

“The police are hunting that man. What I'm here about is help with obtaining access to my husband's account. The banks are not giving it to me.”

After too many words and her name inked on a printed piece of paper, she stacked five Double Eagles on top of his desk. Beside them, she laid her marriage document and reports from the police and undertaker.

The man agreed to look into her problem with the firm understanding that the hundred dollars only got him started.

Once outside, she resisted the urge to fill her lungs. The manure and horse urine stench smelled bad enough, but it might even be

better than that acrid odor of lawyer greed. It proved almost more than she could bear.

The need of a bath overwhelmed her, and maybe a stiff drink on the way.

That evening in her hotel room, once out of her bath and dressed for supper, she decided she best take stock before she went downstairs. One at a time, she pulled out the bags, counted the coins and greenbacks.

Her worldly wealth—until she gained access to her husband's other accounts had dwindled to just over four thousand dollars.

Going so fast, it couldn't last long.

Oh, dear Harold. He meant to leave her well off so she'd never have to be concerned over provision again. What a wonderful, caring man she'd lost. And it was all her fault, too. If only she'd....

Self-flagellation hardly ever stopped.

Stowing the money away in various and sundry hiding places, she slipped out and locked first her bedroom then the outside door.

After a nice, albeit over-priced, meal and four two-dollar highballs later, she found herself alone in bed again. She hated it all. Being alone. Being in New York.

Having to hire an attorney to get what was rightfully hers.

Getting back up, she lit the oil lamp and picked up the list she'd written. She studied on it for a while.

If the bankers were going to be so hard in every city, why bother? Harold himself had scratched off the southern banks until the end of the war, but that might not happen for another ten years, if ever.

The prospect of living the high life she'd become accustomed to as queen took on a shade of unlikely. For starters, she needed to find a new place to stay.

Maybe she should even buy a house, or go farther north. There in Glen Falls, she owned a grand mansion. She decided to give the lawyer a few days, then she'd be gone.

Away from the horrible, dangerous city. With or without her money. The four thousand certainly wouldn't last long there.



The train's whistle sounded two long blasts before the rhythmic chug started slowly then kept a good beat. The locomotion pulled the cars forward, but failed to impress Charley.

What just a few days ago had been a novel mode of transportation, had become the norm. He still had another ten hours if it stayed on time.

Very unlikely, according to the conductor.

Leaning against the window pane, he closed his eyes, but sleep eluded him. Never a big napper, he turned his attention to his fellow travelers.

A smattering of men with two ladies traveling together sat at a table three seats ahead and across the aisle. Seemed to be his mother's age, perhaps younger, but not by much.

He preferred the company of men, but Yankees...a different breed. With the few he'd engaged, the conversation—usually sooner than later—came around to his military service. Unwilling to take the easy way out and lie, he responded truthfully, and it never went well that he served as a sergeant in the Confederate Army.

Almost all took his present status wrong, but he allowed them to believe the past tense. Just like Uncle Henry drilled in, 'A man didn't have to tell everything he knew.' And so far, no one offered to shoot him.

With his uniform left back in Texas for safekeeping and him decked out in his private citizen clothes, who could tell?

Arriving to the diner car late, he took a seat at a table across from the ladies. Once he ordered his meal, he watched them out of the corner of his eye. Like when he wanted to best a bronc, he'd watch him without actually looking at him.

Both women had a book on the table under their clutches. He strained to see the title on the spine, but neither was angled right.

And instead of reading, they chatted away between dainty little bites of chicken. He ordered the beef then listened. With more talking than eating, they'd be at their meal a while.

Women. He loved them all, but would he live long enough to ever understand them? He hoped maybe at least one someday. His ignorance of the gender sure had cost him his Lacey Rose.

Hoping to gain insight, he deliberately faced away, staring off, then focused his ears on their conversations with no chance of being caught or—he hoped—seeming an eavesdropper. Those ladies had already been traveling together for how many hours?

And yet, still had so much to say, they could hardly be bothered to eat.

His food came. While he ate, he returned to his ladies, watching without looking at them.

Though still not finished, the porter came, took away their plates, then returned with a tray of coffees.

Soon as he finished, he ordered one, too, though he usually never drank the stuff of an evening—had enough trouble getting to sleep without compounding the effects of the brew on top of all his worries.

Finally, the darker-haired one stood then scurried toward the back of the car where the privy was located. The one still at the table lifted

her traveling companion's book, looked back, shrugged, then set it on the table's edge where he could see its spine.

Love Around the Apple Trees by May Meriwether.

Charley pointed at the novel. "Good book."

The matron looked at him as though he'd crossed some social barrier.

"Sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean any affront."

"No, no, not at all." She softened some. "Yes, it is a good book. We both love Miss Meriwether's stories. Do you read, young man?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. My parents insisted."

"I'm a bit surprised you've read any of May Meriwether's...they're romances, you know. I believe there are a few you'd like in particular...like *The Ranger*. It's quite full of western adventure."

"Yes, ma'am. But my father assigned that *Apple Trees* book there when I was ten." He nodded toward the novel sitting on her table then chuckled. "He and Mother had been gone for a month. I'd stayed with my uncle, and hadn't got around to even looking at it."

Closing his eyes, he relived that day for a few heartbeats. "I ended by getting the lady who would become my aunt to tell me enough of the story to write a report for my parents." He laughed. "Didn't work, of course. They saw through it, and I had to read it anyway, but I loved it. I've actually read them all."

"Well, that's wonderful that a young man of your age would be so well read! You should thank them—your parents. May Meriwether's a talented author, has a way of putting a reader right down into her stories, at least all of them I've read."

"Yes, ma'am. My cousins have a collection of every book she's ever written."

"Good." The lady extended her hand across the aisle. "I'm Pauleen Shriver. My sister and I are traveling to Albany; it's our home."

Charley took it, shook it as he'd been taught, firm, but cognizant of her feminine fragility. "Charles Nightingale, pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four, why?"

She raised both shoulders slightly. "Oh, I thought perhaps you were named after one of Miss Meriwether's characters, but that book came out after you were born."

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned. "It's the other way around."

"Excuse me? What's the other way around?"

"When Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk rode into Bold Eagle's peace camp, I still called the war chief my father, but he traded me and my mother to Levi for his long gun and painted pony and some other stuff."

“No! It couldn’t be! That’s fiction...a story May Meriwether concocted.”

“No, ma’am, well, she fictionalized the true account a bit, I suppose, but it’s pretty much as it was. My Aunt May wrote *The Granger* first—well, after she was in Texas; it was her first. Then *The Ranger*, but those two books are more fact than fiction.”

“You have got to be jesting! Are you telling me that you’re the Charley Nightingale? The four-year-old son of Sassy, the boy rescued from the Comanche?”

“One and the same. Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, I can hardly wait for Claudia to get back and tell her! Let me introduce you. Will you?”

For the third time, he chuckled that day. When had he last known any mirth? He honestly couldn’t remember. “Of course, you may.”

“Tell me, Charley, what are you doing this far north and on a train heading to Albany?”

Perhaps he’d said too much, but then this lady didn’t know Lacey Rose. Except she was in the book, too. Though mostly only getting herself born. “Family matters, ma’am. And if you don’t mind. I’d rather not say more.”

“Oh, of course, how rude of me. I’m sorry. I certainly didn’t mean to pry.” She glanced behind her. The lady’s sister walked toward the table again. The minute she reached it, Miss Pauleen jumped right into her introductions. “Claudia! You’ll never guess who this young man is.”

The lady took her seat, turned sideways, and stared at Charley. “Do I even get a hint?”

“He’s from Texas.”

“Oh my! What are you doing so far from home, young man?”

“Don’t ask, Sister. He doesn’t want to tell. But that’s not what’s important! Guess! Now think about it, and you can figure it out.” Pauleen tapped the table. “He’s twenty-four, too!”

“I love a challenge.” She glanced at her sister. “I presume he’s famous.” Then she went to studying on him. “Let’s see...you’re too young to be Sam Houston.”

Charley grinned, delighted at the sisters’ antics. “He’s dead, you know. But he has eaten at my Uncle Henry’s dinner table. Many a meal, especially when he wasn’t in office.”

“Sam Houston’s eaten at your uncle’s table? Wow, so that’s very impressive. Let me think.”

Pauleen shook her finger at him then touched her lips with it. “Don’t tell her anymore!”

“Henry...from Texas...your Uncle Henry is who?”

“No! He can’t tell you that!” Miss Pauleen patted her sister’s hand.

"If he tells you that, you'll get it for sure. It'd be cheating! And I want you to figure it out!" She picked up the novel and held it against her chest, the cover toward her sister.

"Toodleloo, Pauleen Shriver! There's probably fifty thousand or more folks in Texas now. How could I ever know? Tell me! Tell me who he is! Introduce us properly!"

"How about I give you a clue? My mother's real name is Rosaleen, but some folks still call her Sassy."

The lady's eyes widened. "No! You are not Charley Nightingale!" She faced her sister. "Is he? Is that who you're saying he really is?"

The grin on Miss Pauleen's nodding face would put a beaming smile on the Mona Lisa.

Claudia glared though. "He is not. What made you ever think I'd fall for that? You put him up to this!"

"No, I did not! May Meriwether is his aunt, married his Uncle Henry Buckmeyer!" She turned back to Charley. "Tell her!" She faced her sister again. Ask him anything! Any question from the book!"

"What rank was Levi Baylor when he rescued Sassy and Charley from the Comanche?"

He snickered and shook his head. "He was a sergeant, and Wallace Rusk was a private. My partners didn't get word of their promotions until we got back to Austin."

"See? It is true. Charley, I'd like you to meet my doubting-Thomas sister, Claudia Jeffcoat."

"Doesn't prove anything. Too easy." The disbelieving sister turned on him again. "When Levi and Rose were trying to get his horse back, what did Charley throw at Laura?" The lady held her finger up. "And what color was Levi's horse and its name?"

What a hoot! He loved the game. "I threw a horned toad, and actually, I gave The Gray his new name, Shooter."

"What did Laura name her baby?"

"Lacey Rose, after Mama's suggestion. Lacey after Wallace and Rose after her. Miss Laura liked it."

"Did Laura and Wallace ever get married?"

He shook his head then leaned back at the mention of his partner's name.

"Is something wrong, young man?"

"Uncle Wallace died of a wound received in the Battle of Laredo."

"Oh, dear, that's terrible."

Chapter Fifteen

All the rest of the way to Albany, the sisters peppered Charley with questions about his parents, uncles, and cousins. Miss Claudia, the older of the pair—once he finally convinced her of the truth—asked the most.

Miss Pauleen seemed happy enough just to stare at him. Flattered him some, but the more she did, made him a bit uncomfortable.

Quicker than he expected, the train pulled into the Albany station. Only thirty-two minutes behind schedule, a minor miracle, according to the conductor. He helped the sisters with their luggage then extended his hand.

“Such a pleasant day visiting with you ladies. Sure made the trip go fast.”

Pauleen took his hand, shook, but didn’t let go. “Where are you staying, Charles?”

“Haven’t got that far. Know of a good, reasonable hotel?”

“No, not here! They’re all either too high-priced or dumps. You should stay with us! We have plenty of extra rooms.” She looked from him to her sister. “Tell him, Claudia. He can stay with us while he’s in town.”

“Of course! Where’s my manners? We should have already offered. Yes, by all means. Please say yes.”

Why not? Even with the five hundred extra that he didn’t pay the crook, his money belt grew lighter by the day. “Ladies, I’d be honored.”

Their house, a grand two-story not quite in the class of his parents’ home and nowhere as nice as Uncle Henry’s mansion, still it smelled sweet and looked clean and comfortable.

Rather charming on at least an acre of well-manicured grounds surrounded by a white picket fence. They put him in a nice-sized room on the second floor that Pauleen claimed caught the most breeze.

By that time back home, evenings were staying warm and sticky. The ladies couldn’t believe Clarksville’s nights already carried a hint of the scorcher everyone knew knocked on Texas’s door every spring.

But that first sunset, he found the April nights in New York State pleasantly cool and left the window open.

He loved sleeping under covers, and sleep he did in the feather bed—like a baby.



The Texas heat had not crossed Lacey Rose's mind at all. The few times she'd longed for Charley, her mother's angry words echoed through her soul. Half-breed she'd spit at her. Then his own mandate, to top that off.

Think of him as 'just kin' indeed. Combined, those incidents squelched any desire to return.

Of late, her mind pondered on little else other than money, or rather how fast the small horde Harold left her shrank. Three days passed since her last trek down Park Avenue to the law offices on stinky Wall Street.

How could those people tolerate that stench? Astounding.

Something had to give. As much as she loved living in luxury's lap, she had to go north. Room rent would be due on the morrow, and she didn't want to pay for another week.

Daily rates soared with the eagles, insanely high, so even another day in New York was unacceptable.

Two hours later, she sat the same chair, waiting on the same dour matron to usher her into the same oversized office. Finally, after a full quarter hour of twiddling her thumbs, the little tinkle sounded. Like a bell cow, the grandma led the way into her boss' inner sanctum.

"Miss Longstreet, please." Her barrister—did anyone call them that on this side of the pond, besides Harold?—held his hand toward the same hard-backed chair she warmed before. "I have news."

She eased down, but didn't like the look on the man's face. "Sir, I am a married woman even though a widow, and I would appreciate your acknowledgement of that. It's Mis'ess Longstreet."

"Of course." He cleared his throat. "I contacted all three New York banks on your list, and none admitted to having an account in your husband's name. But..." His lips spread into what had to be his version of a smile. "Two of the three have offered to settle."

"Settle? What does that mean exactly?"

"If you're willing to relinquish all claims, they will pay you a total of fifteen hundred and sixty dollars."

"What? That's a fraction of what he had in those banks!"

"According to your records...but each pointed out that you don't have any account numbers, and your name is not listed anywhere. Basically, they've all seen your husband's demise as a chance to garnish his money."

"That's absurd!" She wanted to kick something or someone. Over twenty thousand and the crooks dangled fifteen hundred sixty little green backs, hoping she'd go away! "Why the odd number?"

"I was subtracting the extra forty dollars you owe me."

“You’ve blown through the hundred, and I owe you two more Double Eagles?”

“Yes, ma’am. Not counting today’s visit. All I have to offer is my expertise, ma’am, and I bill at the rate of fifteen dollars an hour.”

She wanted to bolt, stop the clock, but didn’t. She needed this man or one like him. The bankers wouldn’t let go of two bits without him, much less the thousands Harold wanted her to have. “You’re my attorney. Isn’t this illegal? Can’t you demand that they recognize the marriage certificate and my lawful inheritance as his wife? What do you recommend?”

“Take the money. If you’re careful you could live on it for years, buy a little place out of town.”

“Is that what you would do if I were your wife they were dealing so dishonorably with? Take the pittance and run? I think not, sir.”

“My wife’s name is on every account, ma’am, and she holds a comprehensive list of my financial holdings.”

“My husband intended to add me. We were practically on our honeymoon! Still walking on clouds and celebrating our love. Neither of us ever dreamed he would meet such a horrible fate. There must be something I can do! What would you tell your wife if she found herself in my position?”

“I’d want her to take them to court. Force them to give her every cent of the money. And it is legally yours alright, but they have possession of it, and until they’re forced, I doubt they’ll give the bulk of it up.”

“How much will forcing them cost me?”

“Thousands, and maybe years. They keep a plethora of high-powered attorneys on retainer. I guarantee, those men know all the tricks to drag things out. The longer it takes, the longer the banks get to use your money, and the more you have to spend to get it.”

She hated them all, wanted to scream or cry or....

“There is another way that will not cost you additional funds now.”

She leaned back. “What is it?”

“It’s called a contingency.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t charge you another dime now, but then when they do finally pay, my wages amount to a third of whatever I recover.”

Now she hated him. “What? That’s almost seven thousand dollars!”

“It is, and I must say your math impresses me. Most ladies can barely add two and two without paper and pen. But...for all my work, no matter how long it takes, I get nothing until I can make them pay. If I fail, I am out my time and overhead. Think about it. With that

much money at stake, should you leave any stone unturned?"

Well, maybe hate was too strong a word. His reasoning made sense and proved a strong argument. "What about the other banks? Will you go after them, too?"

"Yes, ma'am. Until they made that nuisance offer, I admit to being skeptical of your claim. However, a friend of mine knew your late husband. The amounts of money on your list are very believable, giving Mister Longstreet's talent at the gaming tables. He assured me there's no reason to doubt the totals you gave."

"I'm leaving town. We have a place in Glenn Falls. Do you need my signature on something to get this contingency thing going?"

Took only twenty more minutes for him to ink in her name on his pre-printed forms. What a dodge! Attorneys getting paid to fight other legal counselors in front of ex-lawyers who'd got themselves on the bench. They all had their hands in her clutch.

"Wasn't it Shakespeare who wanted to kill all the lawyers?"

The man nodded. "Yes, Mis'ess Longstreet, but without us, the little man, or rather young widows such as yourself, wouldn't stand a chance against the money vultures."

How quaint. One blood sucker mocking a kindred profession. "You have a point." She stood.

"Keep in touch. You'll need to return when I arrange for us to be on the court docket."

"I will, but I mean to stay in Glen Falls for now—no plans to travel in the near future—send any correspondence there, general delivery."



By the evening meal of the third day with the sisters, Charley had decided he couldn't mooch off of the ladies' kindness another day. Aunt May would send more coin, or he could get a job if need be, but wandering the capital all day seeking information then eating the ladies' food morning and night didn't set well.

The Colonel wouldn't take kindly if he were to know Charley was sucking up the sisters' meager living.

"Wash up, Charles. Pauleen will have it on the table any minute now."

"Yes, ma'am." He did as told, then took the seat they'd insisted he sit, head of the table, with one on each side. Made him sort of the man of the house, except he wasn't. They'd both insisted he drop the miss. Said it made them seem older, and he definitely didn't want to offend his hostesses.

The younger sister set the last bowl down then eased into her chair on his right. "Dig in, Charles."

The women calling him Charles seemed a bit formal at first, but once he started getting used to it, he sort of preferred it in a way. Made him think differently of himself, like he was older and a gentleman, instead of a half-grown farmer turned soldier.

When in Rome do as your benefactor does. That's what Uncle Wallace said when someone didn't bless free food, so Charley had been taking that bit of wisdom to heart.

So far, none of it had made him sick. Though the sisters weren't in Miss Jewel's class, they laid a right tasty meal on their fancy table.

Shortly, he had his fill. His mama always claimed he ate too fast. Old habits die hard. He'd told her more than once that of all his memories of living with the People, one of the most powerful remained wolfing down your food.

They stuffed themselves in plenty and never complained in lack. That had been so ingrained in him it had been hard to change.

The gluttony had been the easiest to avoid at Uncle Henry's table, but eating like a wolf stuck with him, fast and furious. Claudia finished next, then cleared the table other than Pauleen's plate.

Her younger sister wouldn't stop talking long enough to finish.

Leaning out, he looked toward the kitchen. "How about letting me help tonight?"

"No, sir. Sister has a surprise. You enjoy yourself. I'm almost done."

The younger lady stood, collected her nowhere near clean plate, and rushed to the kitchen. She returned with an unlabeled, dusty bottle and three crystal tumblers. "Brother came by while you were out, Charles. Brought us this month's share."

"Sorry I missed meeting him."

"Oh, we told him all about you." She grinned. "We own a distillery, fifty miles or so up state. Twice a month, our baby brother comes by with our share of the loot—hooch and dollars both—but even more important is, once a month we each get three bottles of Daddy's private stock."

Claudia strolled in holding a tray with three small cups. "Wait until you taste it, Charles." She put a cup in front of him. "Stewed apples with honey and cinnamon. We just love it with father's whiskey. It's been aging for sixty years in oak barrels." She giggled.

"Wow, that long?" Older must be better since they appeared to be so proud of the fact.

"Oh, just you wait!" Pauleen took her apple cup and lifted it to her nose, breathing in deeply.

The elder made a show of opening the bottle. "Brother taps one keg a month. The first nine bottles, we split. He sells the rest for an outrageous, exorbitant amount to fancy folks with more money than

sense!”

“We have a waiting list should any of our clientele die or go on the wagon, but they never would.” Pauleen held her glass out toward her sister.

Claudia pulled the cork, then poured his glass first, two fingers high. He didn’t have the heart to tell her he didn’t like whiskey. Imbined a beer now and again, but the hard stuff, he’d never taken more than a taste. Next, she filled her sister’s, then sat and spooned herself a little of the apple concoction.

Obviously savoring it, from her expression, she chewed then washed it down with a man size slug of the liquor. She giggled again. “Good old Daddy! No one ever matched his touch at cooking mash.”

He followed suit. Tasted better steamed apples before, but man, oh, man, was she right about that whiskey. Had to be it. He’d just never tasted any good stuff.

Didn’t like the rotgut the soldiers drank, but this...a whole different mule! Or rather race horse. No wonder the Jeffcoats had a waiting list.

They both stared at him with ear to ear grins, no doubt waiting for his comments.

“Wow. Delicious. I have never tasted anything like it.” He tilted his tumbler again just in case a drop remained. Pauleen quickly refilled it the moment he set it down. He tipped his head in a thank you. “Tell me, what does this liquid gold sell for?”

She reared her eyebrows and shoulders then let them fall. “Last we heard, forty a pint, but that was years ago. Sister and I don’t bother with the business end. We just spend the profits and drink the whiskey.”

“Every month. Isn’t it lovely?”

“Well, Sister, we don’t spend all the money every month.”

Claudia turned toward Charley. “It builds up so fast, but we do enjoy traveling and love adding to our library.”

Shaking his head in agreement and understanding, he took another bite, happy to wash it down with the smoothest—and only—liquor he’d ever enjoyed. Perhaps he should reconsider leaving.

Appeared the ladies had plenty of coin. And he hated the thought of not sharing their inheritance. He finished off his desert then drained his glass.

“That was absolutely wonderful, dear ladies. Thank you truly. I best turn in.”

“No, not so early!”

“We never stop with one! Or two. There’s more apples. Stay, please. Tell us about your day.” Pauleen poured his glass practically all the way to the top, three fingers if it was...if it was...oh, never

matter what it was.

Claudia refilled his cup with sweet apples again, too. "Have you made any progress, in whatever it is you're doing?"

He'd been wrestling with that very thing. Folks acted as though Pinkerton employed him, or worse, that hunting Harold Longstreet was like looking for a nail in a hay stack. He took a few sips while batting the notion around. "Can I trust you, ladies?"

"Surely you jest, dear Charles. Of course you can." Pauleen patted his forearm.

Her sister agreed without touching him. "We've never ever broken a confidence."

"She's right. We do not tell tales out of pocket."


Took him three more refills to tell the sisters why he'd traveled to Albany. From his first kiss, all the way to mashing the blackmailer's hand and finding out about Longstreet.

"There it is, ladies. My sad story. Lacey Rose has gotten herself in trouble. Hopefully, I can find her and bring her home before it's too late."

He stood and stretched. But that first step caused the room to tilt and roll. He stumbled, but suddenly, Pauleen stood beside him, holding him up.

"Lean on me, my Charles. We need to get you into bed."

Chapter Sixteen



Pauleen set the steaming cup and saucer down then slipped into her chair. She kept her face—she hoped—expressionless. Wouldn't want Charles to misunderstand.

"Thank you." He held the cup to his lips, blew, then sipped a taste.

"You're welcome."

He held his off hand out toward her. "Found this in my bed this morning."

Swallowing, she held her hand under his, and he dropped her gold necklace into her palm. Oh dear. "Good, good. I'd wondered where that might be."

He blew, sipped, blew some more, then took a fair-sized gulp. He looked toward the kitchen. "Where's Claudia?"

"Downtown. She knows a man—well, we both know him, but he called on her once upon a time—anyway she wanted to ask him if he knew Harold Longstreet."

"Oh, she didn't have to do that."

"No, Charles, we want to help. Talked it over this morning over breakfast. We both hated to hear about Lacey Rose. Why, we feel as if we were right there when the poor little thing was born.

"We so wanted to know if Wallace married Laura, but of course, had to wait for the next dime novel to be released for public sale. Anyway, we decided helping you help her was the very least we could do."

The young man's eyes drew her into his soul without effort. She'd never known another man like him, so strong in character and physique. Yet so young.

"Well, I do thank you, but the two of you have done so much already." He took another long pull on his coffee. She couldn't read his thoughts well. Did he know? Was he angry...or pleased? "Anyone else in the house?"

"No, just us." She smiled, hoping maybe....

"About last night..." He filled his lungs then exhaled slowly. "I thought I'd had me a wonderful dream...until I discovered your locket."

She patted his hand. "Thank you again for finding it."

Nodding her a you're-welcome, he exhaled again. Poor boy. She'd taken his breath away. "Well, been thinking it over while I scraped my

face. And there's nothing else to –"

She touched her finger to his lips. "We needn't speak of it, dear Charles. I realize that I was only a stand-in. And well, Sister and I most assuredly should have warned you about Father's special whiskey. Brother doesn't cut it much. But certainly...for my honor and yours...Claudia cannot know."

"I'll never say a word."

Batting her lashes, she took his hand in both of hers and stared into his fathomless blue eyes. "I must admit...I haven't enjoyed myself so much in such a long time, Charles."



A part of him wanted to argue. It had been so drummed into him that lying with a woman meant the consummation of a marriage, but Pauleen acted as though it had been nothing, meant nothing, except it did.

"My mother...well, she...uh...."

"I know what she went through. But, dear Charles, you did not force me in any way last night. If anything, it was more the other way around, and I apologize for that. I do. I never intended to..." She shook her head. "Anyway, my husband..." She lowered her gaze. "We don't see each other much."

What? "You're married?" The throb behind his eyes lessened. The news he was an adulterer sobered him up considerably.

"I am."

"But why...why didn't you tell me? You never mentioned...."

"It's a long story, but leave it to say that he and his housekeeper and their three brats live at the distillery. He helps Brother some, oversees the farm." She shrugged. "He comes around every now and again, and we're civil, act like everything is peaches and cream. But haven't shared a bed in... The arrangement works well for both of us."

"I see."

She touched his forearm. "I'm free to come and go. Sister and I have fun and..."

Though interested to hear more about her life, he didn't want to be impolite and pry. "When do you expect Claudia back?"

"She mentioned she'd like us to meet her for dinner. There's an Italian bistro we both like. She can let you know if she's uncovered any leads, then afterwards, perhaps if you want, we could watch our nine play some bases."

"What's that?"

"Baseball. Do you play?"

"Oh, Aces, yes! I'd enjoy that, love it. I've played some, but get

banged up bad if Houston and Bart are involved. My boys are rougher than cobs.”

A chuckle escaped, but behind that a ding to his soul. While he gallivanted all over the country, drinking expensive whiskey and taking a lady’s pleasure, they were still fighting Yankees. “You been following the war?”

“Some, but Sister and I are hoping for a settlement. Appears Bobby Lee is going to fight to the last man, and if someone doesn’t beat Lincoln in the fall, the war might go on forever.”

“What about Texas? Any news?”

“Haven’t heard, but we don’t read the papers every day. Puts me in the dumps just thinking about all those men killing each other.”

“Me, too. From that first dust-up, I’ve hated this war.”

The walk to the bistro proved easy. Never had a meal he couldn’t pronounce, but it sure was tasty. Claudia informed him of the inquiries she made and promised to check back the next day.

The bistro served a delicious, flaky pastry with some sort of sweet cheese for dessert, and he finished both of theirs when they claimed they couldn’t eat another bite.

The way the nine men played the bases shamed his and the boys’ skills. They threw and hit so hard and fast. So good that folks stood on the raised benches and hollered like a horde of Comanche just rode over the hill.

The whole game and its fans tickled him. Fun time, but he never cottoned to standing in one place much.

He leaned in close to Pauleen. “Fine if I go on home?”

“Why certainly, Charles. I’ll go with you.” She tugged on her sister’s sleeve.

Claudia held a finger up, then once the batter swung and missed, turned. “Yes?”

“We’re going home, dear. We’ll stop by the market on the way then see you there whenever you make it.”

“Good.” She turned back and waved at them without looking. “See you, later, dears.”

After buying a slab of beef and a basketful of vegetables for soup, but still four blocks from the Jeffcoats’ home, the wind freshened out. The temperature dropped considerable. Charley pointed at the swirling dark clouds.

“Storm’s coming. We best head on home.”

“Yes, dear.” She sounded as though he was boss, and she ready to submit to whatever he said. Grabbing his empty hand, she pulled.

“Come on. I know a short cut.”

Within ten steps, the rain fell in sheets. Nothing to do but keep on going. Hopefully, she knew where, because she had him all turned

around. She ducked into what looked to be an alley. Halfway through, she stopped under an out-building's overhang. He put himself between her and the storm and wrapped his free arm around her shoulder.

Her dress soaked, he realized the gauzy material was so thin. Offered her no warmth at all, and she shivered something fierce.

Plus that New York rain fell colder than any ever wet him in Texas. He snuggled her in tight, holding her against him, and her shivers soon subsided. Staying pressed against him, she looked up.

"Thank you."

He nodded, then like his lips were still dreaming, lowered his face to hers. She tasted so good and kissed him back, snuggling even tighter. For the longest, he stood there with his cheek on the top of her head and his arm wrapped around her.

The rain eased up. "Come, Charles, let's hurry home. I don't think we can get any wetter."

"But you're cold."

"I can make it, and you can warm me again once we're dry."

Finally on her back porch, she shucked her wet dress, but kept on her undergarments. Still, he'd never seen a lady in such. She laughed when she caught him gawking then ran inside.

For the longest he stood there dripping, then took off his shirt and dropped it in her pile.

"Hello? Anyone got a towel?"

No one answered. But she materialized in the door and threw him a sheet.

"Wrap yourself in that, and get out of those clothes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"But first, give me that market basket. I need to get the soup on."

In a fresh shirt and trousers, he kindled a fire before Claudia arrived, soaked herself and in a foul mood. Their nine were behind when the game got rained out, so they lost. She hated it when they lost.

But to the sisters' surprise, Archibald Beasley—the friend she'd visited before the game about Longstreet—showed just as the cornbread came out of the oven. Of course, he agreed to stay long enough to eat.

Longer, he laughed, if the ladies bribed him with some of their daddy's special stock.

One big bowl of soup and two nice-sized pieces of cornbread later, Claudia insisted everyone retire to the parlor.

With drinks and custard promised to finish the evening, Charley led the way then waited for the guest, who sat on the overstuffed settee. He took the rocker across from the man. The ladies waltzed in

bearing four tumblers and china cups on a tray.

Charley wanted to ask the man about Longstreet, but figured he held back what information he'd obtained quite on purpose. Who wouldn't want to be plied with the smoothest firewater that side of the Queen's table?

Maybe not even there; he needed to remember to ask Aunt May.

Second round poured, Mister Beasley took a nice sip then looked straight at him. "Friend of mine played poker with Longstreet last month, and yes, a young dark-haired beauty came in an hour or so after the game started. Alexandra something or other. My friend said she was a big loser though. Longstreet the big winner."

"Did your friend know where the man might be headed?"

"He thinks Philadelphia, but wasn't certain. Didn't appear to him Longstreet and the girl were together though. Since she lost most of her money, she quit the game at midnight. If you decide to go, tell Lefty at the Wessex I sent you."

"Yes, sir." Charley didn't ask any more questions.

Didn't want to implicate Lacey Rose in a scam, but it sure sounded like her. At least he knew she'd survived her time with that man. No thanks to that so-called King of Diamonds. What a reprobate.

He appreciated that apparently Claudia hadn't told her friend Charley suspected Lacey helped the man cheat at cards.

The conversation shifted to the game of bases then the three of them got to asking each other about mutual friends. He lost interest and excused himself with a not-too-hard handshake and a hearty thank you.

Philadelphia. How far was it? And if they'd played there last month, what were the odds they'd still be there? It seemed unlikely. According to the blackmailer, Longstreet didn't stay too long anywhere. Logical for a cheat and a scoundrel.

He blew out the lamp then slipped into bed. Jumping right back up, he closed the window then slipped back between the cold sheets and pulled the quilts up to his chin. The idea of Lacey Rose posing as some fancy gambling lady soured his stomach. What he'd done last night probably would sour hers if she ever found out. Not that she would.

Sleep found him, then a suddenly icy backside brought him almost to consciousness. He rolled over.

Pauleen cooed softly in the dark. "My bed is so cold, and you're so warm."

He knew he shouldn't, but he let her press up next to him.



The same storm that blew through Albany hit Glenn Falls, but Lacey had turned in early that evening.

The day's news had set her adrift. She had the money to pay off the banknote Harold had taken out on the house, except the grubby lawyers had their hands out again, insisting they needed to help her prove she owned it, before she could ransom it from the bank.

The question kept coming again and again. Should she spend her money that way? Thinking about it made her head spin.

If only she could ask Uncle Henry, or even Wallace Rusk. Charley could tell her what to do, even if they were just kin. That didn't mean she couldn't ask his advice or he wouldn't give it.

If she spent the money, then what? Would she have enough left to live on until her blood sucker beat down the bank's leeches, and forced them to pay what rightfully belonged to her under the law?

How long would that take before she finally got her hands on her two-thirds share of Harold's money?

She fell into a fitful sleep. At first her dead husband walked her dreams. He kept telling her something, but she couldn't understand what he said, then Charley strode in like he owned the room, exactly like he did back home.

Why couldn't he love her? He turned from talking with her mother and looked right at her.

Floating into his arms, she kissed him and he kissed her back, without hesitation, as though...he loved her and wanted to be with her forever.

But when she opened her eyes, he'd vanished into thin air. She sat up in bed wide awake. Staying in Glenn Falls was all wrong. She couldn't hole up here waiting forever.

Find Charley! That's what she had to do. Make him understand they were not just kin, they weren't kin at all, but destined to be together. She jumped out of bed then right back in.

Where had she put her robe? She struck a match, lit the oil lamp, and spotted it on the bedside chair. On the run, she left her covers, grabbed the housecoat then slipped back in bed.

With her robe on over her gown, she soon warmed up enough to get up and get a fire going, then after putting coffee water to heating, she sat down and went to plotting how she was going to find her true love.

Without a doubt she had to get herself back to Texas.



That next morning once Charley announced he best get himself to Philadelphia, Claudia claimed she understood, but her younger sister

didn't say much at all. After breakfast, he busied himself packing. A part of him hoped Pauleen might show to help, but the bigger part relieved when she didn't.

All of him hated himself for being so weak around her. But Lacey had taken up with two men now, that he knew of. He grimaced. "That doesn't make one whit of difference."

Talking to himself?

Wallace Rusk declared it permissible so long as you didn't answer back like two separate men. Wouldn't that be something if his pigheaded uncle proved them all wrong and recovered? Before Charley left, Miss Jewel had said no, but...

He let that thought trail off.

His partner was gone. Wallace knew when he sent him after Lacey, and Charley knew it, too.

Maybe for the best. What man would want to go around one-legged? But he could've lived a long life. Stubborn as a mule, that Wallace Rusk.

Setting his carpet bag by the front door, Charley went looking for the sisters. He found Claudia in the sewing room. "Seen Pauleen?"

"She's dressing. Thought she'd make the trip to the station with you."

"Oh, that isn't necessary at all. It's a mighty long walk, and..."

"No, no, dear. We sent Jimmy, that's our neighbor boy, to fetch a carriage." She stood and walked toward him. "Come here, and give me a big hug." She spread her arms wide. He walked into her embrace. She hugged him tight then held him out. "You're welcome any time, Charles."

"Thank you, ma'am. You and Pauleen have been so gracious."

She pursed her lips and nodded. "Maybe too gracious, but..." She shrugged. "Don't tell her. She thinks I don't know anything."

He smiled, gave her a peck on the cheek, then backed up a step. "Maybe Lacey and I can stop by on our way home."

"Oh, we'd love that. Think of it! Meeting baby Lacey Rose in the flesh. That would be grand. Please do! And you be certain and tell your Aunt May how much we love her books. She is such a gifted talent!"

"She's a wonderful lady all around."

"I tell you true, Charles. Meeting you has been a highlight, a bona fide highlight of our lives! Who would have ever thought we'd have the opportunity to host such a celebrity?"

Holding in a downright guffaw, he smiled then ducked slightly. "Oh, Claudia. I'm nothing special, just a --"

"Ah! I beg to disagree, Charles Nightingale!"

Charley turned. Pauleen stood in the door way holding a burlap

bag, but in a fancy dress and hat, looking like on her way to high tea instead of the train station, except for the bag. He nodded toward Claudia.

“Well...I was just telling your sister maybe Lacey and I could stop by on our way home.”

Her expression softened. “Yes, please do. That would be wonderful.”

Once inside the carriage, Pauleen slipped her hand into his and squeezed. “You don’t have to go, you know. We could send someone.”

He faced her. True enough, he considered staying longer, but knew he shouldn’t. Couldn’t really.

“On his death, Wallace Rusk ordered me to find Lacey Rose. If I turned aside and stayed here with you like I’d love to do, it’d be shirking my duty. Make me a deserter. I’m still a sergeant in the Confederate Army.”

Truth be known, he never should have stayed past that first night.

She shook her head. “It concerned me that you’d say something like that.”

The silence hung heavy, drowning out the street noises. Only the clippety clop of the horse’s hooves clicked off the time left to spend with her. Charley brought her hand up and pressed her fingers to his lips then smiled at her.

“I never expected encountering someone like yourself. I’ll never forget you, Pauleen.”

Tears welled, but she absorbed them with her gloved fingertip, keeping them from falling.

“I really loved the little boy Miss Meriwether wrote about in the Ranger. But oh, the person you’ve grown into, Charles! So strong and kind.” She patted his thigh.” “You are more man than I’ve ever known, and it has been such a pleasure—a true and pure pleasure.”

His ticket in hand, he offered a polite handshake that turned into a hug then a tearful kiss. She pulled back, smiled, and picked up the burlap bag she’d been lugging. “Here. I packed you some cheese and bread, and –”

The train’s whistle drowned her out. The conductor hollered right over his head. “All aboard.” Up ahead, the locomotive’s wheels turned. Steam shot out with a hiss, and the train lurched forward, belching a mammoth cloud of steam from its stack.

Grabbing his carpet bag in one hand, he accepted the burlap tote she handed him with the other.

She kissed him one last time, then backed away. “Go on then. Farewell. Please try to come back for a visit. With or without Lacey Rose.”

With one last look, he transferred the dinner bag, adding it to his

own, and jumped onboard. He hung on there and watched her wave at him as the train pulled out of the station. He lifted both bags and grinned until she went out of his sight at the first curve.

She was gone, and he'd never see her again.

No way would he chance Lacey meeting the sisters. She'd probably spot it in a heartbeat if ever the two were in the same room.

He found his right seat, stowed his grip, then looked inside the burlap bag. Besides the bread and cheese, the old dear sent two bottles encased in newspaper and a fancy wrapped package. He tore into it.

A silver hip flask, five twenty-dollar greenbacks, and a note he unfolded.

April 17, 1864

Dearest Charles,

The flask was my father's. I hope you'll think of me every time you use it. The labeled bottle is our regular whiskey. It's good, but only aged three years. The other is one of my father's. Save it for your and Lacey Rose's wedding night.

*I love you,
Your really good friend, Pauleen.*

P.S. Buy her something real nice with the money.

Chapter Seventeen

Of course the bread and cheese proved exceptional, high above ordinary fare. Charley unscrewed the flask's top, and took a sip. She'd filled it with the good stuff. He allowed himself another tiny taste then put it away.

Even if the train stayed on schedule, he'd not make Philadelphia until early tomorrow.

"Why ain't you in uniform, boy? You a draft dodger?"

He faced the man flapping his gums. The idiot directly across from him glared. At first Charley thought to ignore the loudmouth, but the guy shifted in his seat, revealing a missing leg. "No, sir. I'm on leave."

"That so? Fight any battles before you run off?"

"A few, the last at Laredo."

"Where's that?"

"Texas."

"Oh, you with Briggs?"

He shook his head. "Buckmeyer."

"Never heard of him, make any rank?" The man's tone softened. He pulled a pint bottle—looked to be laudanum—from his coat pocket, swilled a healthy slug, then wiped his mouth. "Me, I made sergeant before they took my leg."

Charley pulled out the flask, unscrewed the top, and held it out across the aisle. "Need a chaser?"

"Thanks." He took a medium-sized pull then handed it back.

"Wow, now that's some fine whiskey."

"Yes, it is. Mis'ess Shriver's father brewed that over sixty years ago. Been waiting for us in oak barrels all that time."

"Shriver, you say? My new favorite poison."

"Jeffcoat is the family name."

Once the man settled in, Charley found out he could spin a yarn, talk politics, or drink a man's whiskey when offered with the best of them. But after that first drink, didn't say another word about Charley not being in uniform.

The Copperhead believed sooner the war was over the better, and the conversation helped the miles go faster.

After a fitful night of napping and changing trains, Charley finally made Philadelphia. He discovered that morning the Wessex hotel indeed employed themselves a Lefty, but the man who ran the gaming room didn't come in until six.

First card not dealt until seven, the clerk explained, probably thinking Charley wanted into the game.

“Bring plenty of coin.” The desk man handed over the room key.

No need to change the clerk’s opinion of why he’d come. Like Uncle Henry always said, ‘Nowhere was it written a man had to tell everything he knew.’

Just as the clerk predicted, Lefty walked in a few minutes before the lobby’s big clock struck six. After dropping Archibald Beasley’s name, the man’s whole posture changed. “How is Archie? Still sucking blood from widows and orphans?”

Charley hiked both shoulders. “Don’t know about that. We do have a mutual friend in Miss Claudia Jeffcoat. He said you might know Harold Longstreet.”

“I know him. Why you asking?”

“He knows the whereabouts of a friend of mine, hoping he can help me find her.”

Lefty nodded then greeted two men who strolled by just outside of the big room’s arched double wide entrance. He turned back. “So you know both the sisters?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I take a break around nine. Buy my supper, and I’ll tell you what I know of Harold.”

“Yes, sir, be my pleasure. Where should we meet?”

The man nodded across the lobby. “The bar is fine. I can keep an eye on the room from there.”

Just to be polite, Charley ordered a beer. He started to bring out his flask, but decided that wouldn’t do. The establishment sold hard liquor, too.

His inner ear heard Wallace Rusk’s mocking British accent saying, ‘Bad form, old boy.’ Sure did miss Uncle, and he would for the rest of his days.

That one-legged veteran could spin a yarn. Why couldn’t Wallace have seen a life with one leg? The train passenger lived with it and seemed none the worse for being crippled.

At least, he was alive. He could still tell a whopper, but Uncle would leave him in the dust, especially when he got to bragging on Levi Baylor.

A swaying skirt floated into the corner of his eye and pulled Charley from his ruminations to the lobby.

The lady stopped dead center right next to the huge column, looked all around, then sat on the padded seat that circled the polished pole. It looked to be the room’s main support.

He sipped his beer and watched without staring. In a few minutes, an older man dressed for dinner approached the lady. She stood and

rushed to him like a long lost relative. An uncle perhaps? With her only taking his arm, they strolled toward the stairs.

A few minutes after seven, the lady materialized back at her column, sitting so ram rod straight and proper without a hair out of place.

Strange. Or was it?

Soon a new dapperly dressed gentleman appeared, even older than the first. Surely this was her father, but then no demonstration of affection. Hmm. Again, she took the fellow's arm, and the pair strolled toward the stairs.

The lobby clock struck half past eight.

He'd been watching the gamblers coming and going to and from the game room. Halfway hoped to see the lady and her relatives show for a hand or two of cards, but so far, not even a mistaken shadow.

The hairs on the back of his neck tingled. He eased around.

The lady marched right for him, a rather stern expression on her comely face. She grabbed an empty chair from the next table, swung it around, and sat—in a very unladylike position.

"You Pinkerton?"

"No, ma'am."

"Law dog of any kind?"

"Not me. Do you need assistance?"

"No. Now look me in the eye, and tell me again you're not the law."

He stared right at her. She had beautiful long lashes gracing over pupils a man could fall into. Why did she want to know if he was a lawyer? "Charles Nightingale, ma'am. I'm from Texas."

She leaned back and gave him a little smile. "Excellent. I have an hour open at ten and midnight, twenty gold or greenback, and..." Her lips thinned, and she leaned in close. "I call the shots, and keep the time."

Highfaluting sporting lady! He never would've guessed. The few he'd seen in the saloons of San Antonio acted nothing like this woman and charged a fraction of what this lady did—or so he'd been told.

The Philadelphia floozy looked so prim and proper, yet she talked almost as rough as those gals.

"What's your name?"

"Whatever you want it to be, darling."

Movement turned his head. Lefty pulled a chair up and sat. "Git on now, Sal. This man isn't buying what you're selling."

"You don't know that, Lefty. Let the man speak for himself."

"He's right." Charley gave her a wink. "Now if you'll excuse us, ma'am." Though he definitely found her rather attractive, he'd already messed up once. Hated that, too, sort of anyway, because he also

hated declining her offer.

She stood, kissed her fingertips then touched his lips. "Well, fine then, but I'll be at the end of the bar later should you change your mind, Tex."

Best he could, he put the soiled dove out of his thoughts and faced the man. "What can I get you to eat?"

"I sent word to the kitchen already. My steak will be here shortly. So what is it you want to know about Longstreet?"

Before, during, and after the monster slab of beef, the man talked about Harold Longstreet. He'd seen the young lady Charley described, but she'd only played one of the three nights Longstreet had been there.

Appeared the man never suspected the two were working together.

Barkeep brought a second beer without being asked.

Lefty took a long slug. "She claimed to be some sort of minor royalty, from...uh...Denmark. No, Greece. That's it. But she couldn't play much poker. Won early then lost it all back right before closing time."

"Have any idea where Harold might have gone from here?"

"He doesn't stay anywhere long. Gets to where no one wants to play with him. The man is good. Seldom—if ever—have I seen him lose." The beef eater shrugged with a chunk on his fork. "If it were me, I'd go to New York. That's where the big games are, and Longstreet's from upstate somewhere. Has a home there if I'm remembering right."

"Glen Falls?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Anyone in particular I should talk to in New York?"

As he nursed his second beer, Lefty told him of several saloons and three card parlors, but past that, no telling where his man was or if Lacey Rose even still traveled with him.

Plate cleaned, the fellow glanced toward the game room, drained his drink, then stood. "Watch out for Sally. She's poison."

"How so?"

The man snorted. "Trust me. You don't want to have anything to do with that one." Lefty tipped his hat and headed back to the game room.

Charley ordered himself another beer. By the time he finished it and paid what he owed for the steak, he'd come to the same conclusion on both counts. He needed to get himself to New York and leave the sporting lady alone.



While her true love's train chugged toward New York, Lacey sipped coffee and picked at the breakfast Mother Humphries set in front of her. She and her husband had agreed to sit at the table with Lacey, but only after her insistence.

The old lady—and her dearest even more—still mourned.

And they ate at the first light of dawn, while she preferred a mid-morning breakfast and not ten minutes after the old dear made enough noise to wake the dearly departed.

"More coffee, Mis'ess Longstreet?"

"Please, ma'am."

She'd given up on getting the Humphries to call her Lacey, but wouldn't relent on referring to them as ma'am and sir no matter how many times they assured her it wasn't necessary or even proper under the circumstances.

Once they called her Lacey, then maybe... No. Showing respect to her elders had been ingrained in her.

The woman poured the steaming brew then sat across the table next to her husband. No one spoke of it, but the chair at the head of the table remained empty.

"Mister Humphries and I are going to the Copperhead meeting this evening, dear. Would you care to join us?"

"No, ma'am, but thank you. I'm afraid I hate snakes. Almost got bit by a rattler once."

Her mister chuckled, and the two exchanged a grin. "No, dear, Copperhead is what we call ourselves. Mis'ess Humphries and I are both good Republicans, praying God will end this appalling war. The way things are going, they'll kill half of the men in this country before anyone can win."

A gasp escaped, and Lacey's hand went to her heart. "Half? That many?" Was Charley safe? And her uncles? Oh, she couldn't bear it if anything happened to Bart or Houston.

"We want to stop it now, before it gets that bad. Let the South go. With the thirteenth amendment, all the darkies will come north anyway. Then after a few years, the rebels will come crawling back to the Union."

The idea of the war being over certainly appealed to her as well. She'd gone back and forth trying to decide if she should wait or not to go home.

Her chances of finding Charley until it ended didn't seem too high, a bit like hitting an inside straight. But would her presence make any difference?

"Where is this meeting scheduled and at what time this evening?"

"At the Methodist Church. Deacon Smithson organized it and will be the main speaker. He's very eloquent, dear. I believe it would do

you good to get out of the house.”

Why not go? She'd not been anywhere other than the bank and lawyer's offices since arriving in Glenn Falls. “Yes, ma'am, I might enjoy an outing, but only if you agree to let me treat you to supper in town.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful, but you don't have to at all, dear. Mister Longstreet was so kind to deed us our home and two acres. But if you insist, then yes, by all means, Mister Humphries and I would love a nice supper in town.”

So she and the bank didn't own their cottage. That was good to know. “What time should I be ready?”

“I suppose four-thirty would give us plenty of time to eat before the meeting. My mister doesn't like to trot Buster, that's our horse's name, and the old boy is well into his twenties now.”

“Yes indeed, and healthy as a horse.” The old man broke into guffaws at his own humor. It was good to hear laughter, and though it probably sounded forced, she tried to join in, appreciating his joke.

“Four-thirty it is.” She forked a hunk of salt pork, suddenly hungry. “Thank you for inviting me.”

Her first impression leaned toward wearing one of the black dresses, but it had been almost three weeks, and as well as she'd come to love Harold and his money, no need overcame her to put on as though she couldn't bear life without him.

The midnight blues dress with its modest lace neckline would do. Somber, but not too.

A long bath with lilac salts would do her wonders. And her hair... how should she fix it? She'd never been to a political meeting before. It sounded almost like a party.

Might there be dancing after? She'd love nothing better. Would the good Republicans of Glen Falls think it forward for the young widow to join in the festivities?

Probably no waltzing at all, though she'd truly love twirling around the floor as Harold had taught her. Either way though, it would be good to get out of the house and meet some new folks.

What a shame that Charley couldn't be whose arm she held walking into the Methodist church meeting.


But no. He was still back in Texas seeing to his duty. Texas. Her heart waned. She missed her home and all of her family—except her mother. One day....

Once bathed, coiffured, and dressed in her thirty-five-dollar dress, she admired herself in the mirror. Stunning is what Harold would have said, except for her belly. She'd been eating way too much.

With her hands on her hips, her fingers framed her waistline. Still acceptable. She'd definitely put on a few pounds. Best cut back, or

she'd have to purchase a whole new wardrobe.

Chapter Eighteen



The slow, easy pace to town didn't bother Lacey. Bright wildflowers peeked all along the road, much more plenteous than the last time though, and gardens sprouted new life with happy daffodils and pansies.

They all bloomed so much later than in Texas. New leaves covered the once barren trees, too.

New life all around. She loved spring.

Knowing every occupant along the road, Mother Humphries entertained with her gossip and speculations. Uncle Henry banned such in the Buckmeyer home, due to scriptures, and she confessed to be a Christian, but Lacey didn't have the heart to call the old lady on it.

Besides, it couldn't hurt to know who was who.

To sell the house—once the lawyer fixed it so she could—and pay off the bank might be the wrong move to make.

If she did wait until the war was over, perhaps Wallace Rusk, or even Uncle Henry, could advise her. She vacillated in so many directions.

What seemed so sure at night often sounded preposterous in the light of a new day.

Mother Humphries pointed to her right. "See right up there on the hill, dear? That's old man Dithers, he's..."

Mister Humphries turned and silenced his wife with a look. "Now Mother, let's not go talking out of school."

Wait a minute. What had the old girl been doing all the way? Once her husband turned back to his driving, his mis'ess mouthed, 'I'll tell you later.'

The dry but flavorful roast beef and soupy creamed potatoes Mother Humphries claimed had no butter made the meal passable but easier to not finish.

After a bit of window shopping punctuated with a lot of town history, Mister Humphries tied Buster to the hitching post at the church and put on his feed bag.

Hardly a soul gathered at the rally yet, but Lacey didn't mind. Gave her a chance to meet the folks as they showed.

Thirty minutes or so after her arrival and with fifteen neighbor folks' names safely tucked away for future recall, a rather distinguished-looking gentleman strolled up and extended his hand.

"I'm Nathaniel Smithson. You, Miss Longstreet, may call me Nate,

or Deacon if you prefer.”

She held her hand out. He took it in such a genteel manner, exactly as a gentleman should, but then hung on. “Good to meet you, Nate. You may call me Lacey.”

He let go with a little squeeze. “I’ve been hearing about Harry’s beautiful widow. My condolences, ma’am.”

“Thank you, sir. My husband’s death was a tragic loss.” She glanced at the ground. Was she being forward to even think about being out and about? She gave what she hoped would be construed as a sincere, sad face. “So horrible for him to be cut down in the prime of his life, and so soon after our marriage.”

He nodded. “And what’s your political leaning? I’m a bit surprised to see you here, given Harry’s.”

“Well, since you men have not seen fit to give us ladies the vote, to tell you truthfully, I’ve not interested myself all that much in the affairs of state.”

He smiled. “That sounds just like something Harry would say.”

She better watch herself around that one, smooth as silk, quick to smile, and eyes deeper than any well she’d drawn from. “For sure and for certain, he wielded an influence on me. I understand this is a Copperhead meeting, and that you are the main speaker.” How long had it been since she’d used ‘for sure and for certain’?

It definitely reminded her of Texas and brought a silent smile to her lips.

“Yes, ma’am.” He glanced over his shoulder. Many still strolled along the lamp-lit street leading to the church. “Looks like a nice crowd gathering. Shame we can’t garner the same of a Sunday morn.” He tipped his hat. “If you’ll excuse me, ma’am, I need to make a few last minute preparations.”

She went inside and found Mother Humphries then slipped in next to her, third row from the front. Her mister still huddled in the back with three other old-timers. She leaned in close.

“Have you taken notice of that man sitting across the aisle on the back row all by himself?”

Lacey glanced over her shoulder. “The one with the long gray beard?”

“Yes, indeed. That’s him. Old man Dithers. I swear to you and swear it true, the man looked just like that when the Mister and I were newlyweds.”

“No. How could that be? How old is he?”

“No one knows. Some say he’s a holy man, but he doesn’t attend church regularly. It certainly surprised me when I saw him walk up for this meeting. He hasn’t said a word to anyone in at least twenty years.”

“Folks, if you’ll please find a seat, we’ll get started.”

The kind woman patted Lacey’s hand then motioned for her to scoot in, whispering, “Mister likes sitting next to the aisle, dear.”

After a prayer and two warm-up speakers, Deacon Smithson took the podium.

“Neighbors, what we’ve been hearing is true. Abe’s war has cost more lives on both sides than can even be counted. Never mind the limbs left on battlefields all across our great nation. We cannot afford another four years of this insanity.”

Nate paused, and heads went to nodding. A smattering of amens drifted through the overcrowded room. Otherwise, a dropped pen would have sounded like a cannon shot.

“Like the carnage hasn’t been bad enough, Lincoln promoted that butcher Grant and elevated him to general-in-charge. That man thinks nothing of losing ten, twenty thousand men in a day, just so long as he’s killed some more Johnny Rebs. You know what good old Abe said about that? ‘Finally a general that understands numbers.’ It’s an abomination.”

“Grant’s a drunk!”

“Yeah, he can’t win the war.”

The barbs came from two men sitting behind Lacey, but she didn’t turn to see who.

“Exactly right. Wouldn’t you be, too, with that many souls haunting your dreams?”

General agreement raced through the pews. More folks gave voice to their derision for the war.

“Yes.” Nate pointed to a man on Lacey’s right. “You couldn’t have said it better, brother.” He held his hands out, and the room quieted. “If you didn’t hear what Doc Allen said, it was that we need to vote Lincoln out of office. Elect us a new president.”

The crowd again voiced agreement.

“That’s why we’re here. But it takes money to stand for an election. Now we have several good men, nationally known men, who are considering throwing their hats into the ring, but none of them have the cash needed to challenge Lincoln.

“We’re going to pass the hat here in a minute, but before we do, I want you to first ask yourself this question before throwing in your donation. What is a man’s life worth? Then dig deep, neighbors, and let’s all do our part.

“If we don’t run a good man, then Abe will have another four years to murder even more of our young men.”

Apparently, Nate gave a high sign, because four fellows appeared up front holding collection plates.

“Hear me, now, the Lord has opened my mouth.”

The rest of the room turned, and Lacey followed suit. Old man Dithers stood in the back by the door, his thin hair haloed by the lamp light from outside.

“Give if you want, but it’ll not do any good. This country was born in the blood of rebellion and the sword will not leave our house.

“Lincoln will be re-elected, but God is merciful. General Robert E. Lee will surrender next year on April 9th at the Appomattox Court House; shortly after that the Confederacy will collapse.” The old man turned and walked out as though nothing strange just happened.

No one said a word. Lacey’s heart boomed. She’d never seen or heard anything like it.

Did that old man really know that the war would last another year? How could he? She slowly turned back toward the front and made note that the deacon seemed visibly touched. Several pounding heartbeats passed in silence.

“Folks.” Nate eased out and stood next to the lectern. “A year is too long to wait.” He nodded to the ushers who hadn’t moved. “The convention will be in June in Baltimore. If we can block Lincoln’s nomination, the fighting could be over before the New Year.”

She slipped a twenty into the plate, all folded up so no one could see, as the wooden dish made its way by.

Before the old man, she’d been thinking a hundred would be appropriate, but if Lincoln would be re-elected either way...and if the war was going to last another year...

Did he really know?

Certainly sounded as if he believed it.

A man called on offered a closing prayer, just like in a church service, and then the sanctuary emptied. Most mounted horses or climbed into carriages and left. A few small groups formed, but no dancing.

Did deacons even dance? Was there a Mis’ess Deacon?

Well, Lacey would’ve enjoyed a reception and dancing, and couldn’t deny being disappointed—as if anyone cared—but at least Mister Dithers had provided some fireworks of sorts. For that one reason, she could truthfully say she enjoyed the evening.

Meeting the deacon proved another, but she’d most likely keep that to herself.

Days had become difficult to keep up with, but best she could figure, it was Friday.

If Mister Nathaniel Smithson asked, she might just have to say yes to come Sunday with the Humphries. But the man hadn’t even tried to maintain a conversation with her.

Stopped for a few cursory words then flitted off, obviously too busy getting his back slapped.

Once home and in her bed, she contemplated both men.

Nate appeared to be cut from the same cloth as Harold, not quite young enough to be his son, but close. Old man Dithers had been so specific. Who ever heard of the Appomattox Court House? And even giving the exact date!

Neither of the Humphries said an unnecessary word on the way back. And when the mister neared the spot his mis'ess had pointed out on the way in as Dither's home, he reined Buster to the far side of the road.

That night if she dreamed of either man, she didn't recall the next morning. But between her first and second cup of coffee, she decided on one thing. Invitation or not, she'd have to make church come Sunday. Maybe both men would be there again.



April whirled into May, and still he'd not run down one clue that got him any closer to discovering where Harold Longstreet might have gotten himself off to. Charley had made every card room and hotel that Lefty named, plus a dozen more.

Everyone knew Longstreet—or of him—but no one had seen him in a coon's age.

Then on the third day of May, a stroke of genius bit his backside as he walked past a seller of fine books and other sundries. His Aunt May owned a brownstone there somewhere. And surely there'd be a publisher who would know its address.

Auntie wouldn't mind him staying there at all, and her editor lady might have some idea where else to look.

Spinning around, he hurried inside. Took him all of an hour to find the offices. They'd even put their address in the front of Auntie's books. Did Uncle Henry know she still used Meriwether?

Another hour passed waiting in the outer office, trying to decide the matron's age manning the guard desk. Handsome enough for a woman...what? Fifty-three? No more than fifty-four.

Shame the practice of asking a lady her age had been pronounced impolite. If only somewhere along life's way he'd mastered the art of napping in a straight-backed chair.

His partner had a talent for it. Every time Wallace passed through, his thoughts made Charley miss him again. Hard to believe he was no more in the world. That man could let his chin rest on his chest and be gone in a lightning bug's flicker.

But that didn't mean anyone could sneak up on him.

That wasn't about to ever happen.

Until he could put the slip on either Wallace, Uncle Henry, or his

father, Charley figured he'd not be full grown. So far, after countless attempts, six feet was about as close as he'd gotten. And that only once on a sleeping Wallace.

Now, Houston and Bart? Those boys were a different story, but they didn't count.

Was no news really good news? All that the papers there wanted to write about was Grant and Lee locking horns.

The door finally opened and a woman about Aunt May's age strode past the guard desk right toward him with her hand out.

"Mister Nightingale, I'm so sorry for the delay. How can I help you?"

Removing his hat, he stood and offered a firm shake, mindful of her gender. "Might I have the pleasure of buying you dinner and tell you why I'm in New York instead of Texas?"

The lady eyed him hard. "Where in Texas do you hail from, sir?"

"Clarksville, Red River County."

"I like a man who does his research, but picking a fictional character as a pseudonym is not going to help you get published. Where's your manuscript?" She raised an eyebrow. "And what's your real name?"

Her supposition tickled him. He liked the lady, hard as nails but with a certain appeal. "Charles Nathaniel Nightingale, after my father, but Rosaleen Folsong Baylor didn't saddle me with the junior."

Now she chuckled. "You are good, sir, but I'm out of time. If you want to leave a manuscript, I will give it all the considerations it's due."

"Ma'am, Wallace Rusk died the end of March. A mini ball shattered his thigh bone in the battle for Laredo. From the first, he refused to let the saw bones cut on him." He twirled his hat's brim in his hands.

The woman backed up a step. "No. Not possible. Not Rusk."

"My Uncle Henry tried to talk him into letting his surgeon take it, then after I got him home, Aunt Rebecca begged him, to no avail. The rot spread, and it was too late. That's when he ordered me to go fetch Lacey Rose. She'd run off. Happened right after she got my letter. I've tracked her this far, ma'am."

"You really are Charley, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, and I need help. I was thinking, for Aunt May's sake... Are you interested, or should I go elsewhere?"

Chapter Nineteen



The lady glanced over Charley's shoulder then stepped closer.

"Yes, of course I want to help. My carriage will be here in a few minutes. If you'll come home with me, we can talk about it there."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'd be pleased to."

On the ride up Park Avenue, May's one-time editor, now publisher of the whole shooting match, Federica Dempsey—Freddie, please—quizzed him about his Aunt May and the family.

Twice she expressed disbelief that Wallace was gone, then her face hardened and her tone altered into sounding somewhat harsh.

"Is she working on anything now? *Prairie Daughters* has been out two years, and children everywhere are begging for more *Red Tail*, *The Gentleman Pirate* stories."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know if she's writing or not. With Uncle in San Antonio, she's spending so much time overseeing things."

"Well, you tell her when you see her that I need another May Meriwether book."

The driver stopped in front of a large three-story brick and stone home across from the big park. The man jumped down, ran around, and opened the curb side door. Charley stepped out and extended his hand.

Freddie let him help her with the step then hurried up the stairs.

She led him to a large parlor, asking his favorite drink. From a fancy rolling cart against the hall wall, out of an even fancier bottle, she poured him two fingers worth of single malt Scotch whiskey—whatever that was—into a heavy cut-glass tumbler.

Then she promptly left, promising a short return. He eased into a fancy curved arm, high-backed chair next to the window.

The city still pulsed with activity, like a bunch of ants scurrying every which direction. Her place dripped money. She obviously spared no expense and lived with the best of everything around her. Such a waste of dollars.

A lady clothed in rags selling something on the street caught his attention. Especially with people like that who could use some help.

Freddie returned after longer than he expected, changed from a rather drab beige dress into what appeared to be an evening gown. It sparkled as though studded with diamonds. "Nice dress. Going somewhere?"

"Yes, thank you." She sat on the edge of the matching chair next to a little table that also sat beside him. "I have an important dinner

tonight, but your supper is being prepared as we speak. Now tell me how you came to be in New York."

Through the rest of his first drink and the following one—he liked the Scotch—he told the sordid truths, sparing Lacey's honor as much as possible.

At the end, he leaned back. "So here I am. Never imagined New York would be so big. You have any ideas where I should look?"

"Where are you staying?"

"At a boarding house at the end of Wall Street."

"When my driver returns, he'll take you there. Gather your things, then he'll bring you back here and show you to your room. It'll make things easier. Tomorrow, I'll send word to the police commissioner to see what he can find out. Have you paid the commutation fee?"

"No ma'am, didn't figure to be here come July, so wouldn't have any need to worry about being drafted."

"Well, Lincoln's Butcher is needing cannon fodder. I've heard from several sources, they're going to jump the gun. Move up the date. Wouldn't surprise me if they declared martial law."

That would not be good at all. Charley hated to hear it. How could he take up arms against Texas? "I've got the coin, but my money belt is getting slimmer by the day."

"No, don't pay it. I'm going to Connecticut in two days. I've got a farm north of Danbury. You're welcome to stay there until I hear something solid or it's time to go to Glenn Falls."

The protest formed on his tongue, but remained unspoken. "Is there something there I could do for you to pay my way, ma'am?"

She smiled. "Plenty." The grandfather clock in the hall struck the hour. Freddie stood. "I'm sorry, but I've got to go. Have another drink if you wish while Cook finishes up."

He stood and extended his hand. She shook nowhere near like a man, but firmer than any other woman he'd grasped hands with.

"Thank you, ma'am. I appreciate it, but Aunt May maintains a brownstone somewhere in New York. I'd be happy to help you out at the farm if you need, but if I could find out where —"

"Nonsense. There's no need to be alone, and this way, we'll be able to stay in closer touch."

"But I don't want to be —"

"Charley, dear, it's all settled. Now I must take my leave. I'll see you at breakfast, seven sharp. The cook has the coffee on by five."

The two days passed without any word of Longstreet, and as promised, Freddie took Charley on the train to Danbury then on to the farm in the waiting carriage.

How much money did printing books make?

Then, to his surprise, instead of rows of cotton or corn, on that

farm, horses were the only crop. Dozens of them, big-bellied broodmares in the front pastures. Yearlings in the next, some with their necks over the fence's top rail whinnying and watching the carriage roll by.

Freddie patted his arm. "All of them are thoroughbreds, each a descendant of Diomed. He won the English Derby Stakes in 1780; came to America in '88. We have one of his great-grandsons out of Lexington. Marah named him Sir Lexington. She's mad about the animals. They consume her life."

Charley turned away from the colts and faced Freddie. "I've heard of thoroughbreds, but never seen one before. They're magnificent-looking animals, born to run, right?"

"Yes, they are. Magnificent and very fast."

The house at the end of the lane—modest compared to the mansion across from the park, but still very comfortable—sat in front of a large red barn.

The whole property, one hundred and fifty acres Freddie bragged, was divided into meadows by white wooden fences that looked to be freshly painted.

What a sight. Each of the smaller fields, three or four acres at most, had at least one tree. Some of the bigger pastures had several, and thick woods ringed the whole perimeter.

"I love it. My kind of farm." Charley jumped out and extended his hand.

She took it. "Thank you. It's been in the family since before the Revolutionary War." She turned then nodded toward the house. "Come on. I'll show you around and introduce to everyone. You've already meet Wilhelm."

The front door opened.

A hatless young lady strode out with raven black hair put up in a bun that seemed about to burst out of its bindings with little tufts going everywhere, like she'd been working or riding. She wore a rumpled, split skirt and what looked to be a man's work shirt with sweat stains under her arms.

Boots, brown ones in need of polish, encased her small feet. She stood with her hands on her hips, looking rather put out. "Mother, you came after all. Who's your friend?"

"Charley Nightingale."

"Mother, are you telling me this man is May Meriwether's nephew?"



The next morning, a hundred and sixty miles north, Lacey wasn't thinking about Charley as she stood sideways in front of the big

mirror in her room.

After several full turns, she decided she best change. The lavender dress just seemed too colorful for a widow, but then what difference did that make?

Finding one modest enough in her closet, appropriate for church, reminded her a little of the hours she's spent looking for a four-leaf clover.

Well, what else could she do? Nate being a deacon in the Methodist church and all. How long would it be proper to wait anyway? That was if he even wanted to marry her.

Handsome, well mannered, he'd be a good catch. Somewhat full of himself though, or maybe that was just confidence. Either way, the man's talents impressed her.

Besides being chosen for the Convention, he could hold a crowd with his oration. And, she loved the sound of his voice.

Part of her wanted to pack up and get back to Texas, but if the war truly only lasted until next year that just didn't make sense. Especially if the lawyers couldn't work it all out. She certainly did not want to come back...except Glenn Falls was growing on her.

And if the summers proved as pleasant as everyone claimed, perhaps she could winter in Texas and come north during the heat.

A light tap proceeded Mother Humphries' voice through the door. "Miss Lacey? Mister says we need to leave, dear. Are you ready?"

That settled it, she didn't have time to change. "Yes, thank you. I'll be right there."

The service turned out barely tolerable, as Nate didn't speak. Instead, the old preacher took the pulpit for the second Sunday in a row. What was wrong with the man? Didn't he know everyone wanted to hear from the deacon?

The old elder did let Nate close with a prayer. Then instead of the café, the ladies of the congregation served dinner on the grounds. Put her in mind again of the best Sundays back home, and it appeared the same held true in Glenn Falls.

Like he just happened to find his seat, Nate sat across from her.

How sweet when he stayed there with her during the sack races. He'd asked, no she wasn't interested in being his partner, except she was, just not in any demeaning dash. Then the talk of the coming Convention heated up, and they pulled him away.

Could he prefer politics more than keeping her company?

Once the Humphries began loading the carriage with their empty jars and pan, he did tear himself away long enough to help her up. She liked his firm, yet tender, touch.

"I'm going to New York tomorrow but will be back midweek. Perhaps you and the Humphries could meet for dinner. Say Friday at

one?"

Without consulting either, she answered for the old couple. "We could do that. Friday it is."

"Good." He backed away a step, but didn't take his eyes off hers. "Until Friday."

She matched his stare. The carriage eased into a roll. He grinned and waved but stood his ground. The carriage turned, and though she couldn't see him anymore, she didn't turn for a last look.

As much as she might want to, it just wouldn't be proper to seem too forward. One thing she'd learned with Harold—and even Jack to a point—was that she liked being pursued.

Never again would she make the same mistake she had with Charley.

Hmm. Why had she thought of him?

That almost ruined the ride home. She needed to put him out of her thoughts. He was only God knew where. She hoped not dead on a bloody battlefield.

Tears popped up to blur her vision. She widened her eyes to keep them from falling. Half of the men dead, Mister Humphries had said. But he couldn't be gone from the earth. Could he?

Wouldn't she know? She wallowed in the pain of his absence for a mile or more then straightened her back and cleared her throat.

Fact of the matter remained that Nate was right there, wanting to share a meal with her and... Oh no. What if he only wanted donations, her help in defraying his cost of going to the Convention?



That Sunday afternoon, Freddie announced she needed to catch the train back to the city. Hopefully, she'd discover the next May Meriwether. Charley rode with her.

Not only the gentlemanly thing to do, but he wanted a chance to talk. Then on the short buggy ride, he couldn't quite find the right words.

As the driver weaved his way through Danbury, he finally spit it out.

"Ma'am, Miss Marah...uh... We'll...uh... Well, other than the cook and her husband. I mean at night...we'll be...uh –"

"Unchaperoned, dear? Is that the word you're hunting?"

"Yes, ma'am." His cheeks warmed, surely they'd reddened.

"Dear Charley, so quaint and sweet you are." Freddie patted his hand, before tilting her chin toward him. "My daughter is her own woman."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll be beholden to you if you'll help her as much as she'll let you,

but don't be concerned. You may be exactly what she needs."

He wanted the woman to say more, explain what she meant, but the station came into view. The train already waited, and folks were boarding.

The carriage stopped, and he jumped out to help her down, then walked with her to the first class car. She extended her hand. "You needn't worry about the draft here. Connecticut doesn't cooperate."

"Good to know. Send word if you hear anything about Longstreet."

"Without a doubt."

The steam whistle sounded, and the conductor called for all to board, then she was gone.

Exactly what her daughter needed? What was that supposed to mean?

The next morning surprised him. Marah beat the sun, but not him or the cook.

She entered the kitchen dressed in a slightly different version of what he guessed resembled her work garb, except that her hair, still wild and thick and hanging over and around her shoulders almost covered her back to the waist.

He fought the desire to run his fingers through her tresses. Wallace's 'bad form, old boy' echoed through his soul.

"What are you grinning at?"

"Was I? Sorry." He lifted his near shoulder. "Private joke."

While Marah sipped her coffee, the cook—an older woman of color—worked on taming the wild mane. Shortly she had most of it pinned. "Miss Marah, we best work it over this evening. How about we cut on it some? Sure would make it easier."

"Auntie, you say the same thing every day. I'll never cut it, and you know it."

"Yes'sum. I s'pose I do, but you can't blame me for trying, can you now?" She glanced at Charley. "What do you think, Mister Nightingale?"

"Her hair is beautiful. I've never seen anything like it. My first father would have traded many ponies." He kept himself from smiling, but on the inside, strange goings on, indeed.

For some reason an urge to say something of her beauty in the People's tongue rose as well, but he refrained from that, too.

"You're talking about Bold Eagle, aren't you? Were you really raised by the Indians?"

Nodding, he changed his mind and let loose. Told her how beautiful she was in Comanche.

"What was that?"

"The People's language."

“Translate it.”

He shook his head. “Another time maybe. What’s in store for today?”

“Same as every day. Sixty-two hungry and thirsty horses.”

“How can I help?”

She chuckled. “You ride?”

“Some, why?”

“Care to take on Sir Lexington?”

Chapter Twenty

Charley smelled a ringer. Her smirk confirmed it. “How rank is he?”

She smiled. “He’ll eat out of my hand, but...” She wiped back a stray tuft that had fallen over one eye. “He’s sixteen, but never been broke. If I can’t ride him, I’ll have to sell him.”

“Why? Explain yourself.”

The cook snickered.

Marah’s eyes flashed, and she glared until the fire cooled. “He’s sired most of my fillies. Last year when I linebred him, I had to put down over half his foals. The others never amounted to much either, certainly nothing special...except for one colt.”

One shoulder elevated ever so slightly, and her face seized a moment’s sadness.

Then as fast, like the action fanned her embers, she glared anew. “Why am I explaining myself to you?”

“Because you like the old boy and want to keep him as a pet. Do you already have another stallion?”

“I do. Another grandson of Boston, but I imported his dam from England. And Concord—that’s my next stallion’s name—was bred for speed. It’s what everyone wants now. Sir Lexington throws big-hearted sons that can run forever and jump and fence.” She turned and held out her cup. “Another cup, Cookie?”

Looked like she enjoyed being waited on. “So you like jumping fences?”

Facing him with a you-are-dumber-than-a-barn-cat’s-whisker expression, she huffed. “I breed my thoroughbreds to hunt, so yes. And Mister Nightingale, I do not have pets. I desire to chase after the hounds on Lexi. Now, are you up to riding my horse or not?”

‘Forgive me for breathing’ skipped over his tongue, but he swallowed it. No reason to antagonize the spoiled highness. “Do you have a small corral?”

“Of course.” She rolled her eyes. “On the backside of the barn.”

“What about running water? Say, chest deep?”

“Yes, a creek that runs through the east pasture. Why?”

“I’m not stupid. Do you want me to break him? Or talk the horse into letting you ride him?”

Working her lips from one side to the other, she squinted. “What’s the difference?”

His spread into a smile. He liked this one—sort of. Smart, strong

willed, high strung, but practical with about the prettiest mane he'd ever seen, horse or human. "You'll see. What do we need to do first?"

"Eat breakfast, then we feed and water them. After that, you can ride Sir Lexington."

On cue, Cookie came and set a steaming bowl of oats in front of Marah then him. Next came a jar of maple syrup and a pitcher of milk, then a plate piled high with buttered toast.

"You needs yourself a glass of that milk, Mister Charley?"

"Yes, please, but you don't need to mister me. Charley will do fine."

The cheerful lady smiled and gave him a little nod. "I'm Cookie."

At the barn, stalled animals got breakfast next. With that bunch chomping happily, he helped Marah hook the team up, load the wagon with oats and hay, then tend her charges without much comment, carrying out her barked orders.

If her mother had as much money as it appeared, the morning chores could be cut in half with not too much invested. Her herd proved impressive, and her excellent care obvious.

The closer they got to being through, the more he wanted to see if his touch with horses came east with him.

Finally, she reined the mules to a stop next to the barn then jumped down before he could get around to offer his hand. Without a word, he went to unharnessing the off mule, while she worked on the other.

Just before high noon, he stood across the aisle from Sir Lexington's stall.

While Marah fed him carrots and cooed to him like he was her newborn, Charley studied the stallion. She gave him the last one and backed up before turning. "He bites, be careful."

"Put him in the corral, and I need a soft rope if you have one."

She nodded toward the front double doors. "Stand over there, and I'll let him out." Opening the gate, she kept behind it as the stallion charged out, snorting and throwing his mane.

He looked right at Charley, pawed the ground then bowed his neck.

"Ho, now." Charley waved his arms and stepped forward. Sir Lexington snorted again, threw his head one way then the other, and whinnied to the ceiling.

Looking again at Charley, his nostrils flared, then the magnificent animal turned and trotted to the corral, high stepping the whole way, his long mane and tail flying.

Marah left the stall opened and followed the stallion to the paddock. After closing the animal's stall gate, she faced Charley, grinning like she and her horse had just won something. "Soft rope

you say?"

"Yes, ma'am. Longest you've got."



Marah returned with the rope then caught up with the Texan at the barn's end. "Be careful, now. He'll hurt you." No need to mention how many men she'd hired to break the horse. What a lie. This man—if he was from Texas—hadn't spent a day with the Comanche, much less his first four years.

He took the rope. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Don't ma'am me, I'm not that much older than you."

He only grinned. She kept her smirk on purpose and held his eyes until he turned toward Lexi. She liked it that he didn't talk a lot. And he worked hard, but he wasn't fooling her.

This guy was most certainly not May Meriwether's nephew. He might pull the wool over her mother, but fictional characters were just that. They didn't live and breathe, no matter how well the author made it seem so.

He walked to the center of the corral, gathering the rope in loops then threw it at Lexi, keeping hold of his end. The stallion jumped then trotted along the fence, keeping an eye on Charley.

Round and round he went with the man making tight circles in the center, always facing the horse.

After each toss, the Texan gathered the rope again, turning slowly, keeping his shoulders square to the horse. Twenty or thirty minutes he ran poor Lexi. Then abruptly, the cowboy stopped and turned his back on the stallion.

Lexi stopped as well.

To her amazement, her big brat walked right up to the man. If the idiot couldn't heed her warning, he deserved to get bit. But instead of taking a hunk out of his backside, Lexi nudged Charley with his nose.

She'd never seen anything like it.

The man backed up and laid the rope over the horse's neck. He didn't bolt or anything, just stood there watching the fellow. Then as though Lexi was some plow horse, he looped the rope over his nose, tying it into a halter.

How in the blue blazes?

He led Lexi over to where she stood on the other side of the fence. "Now we have two choices."

She waited, but he didn't finish. The guy certainly knew how to get her goat. "Well? What are they?"

"I ride him here, or we take him to the creek...and you ride him."

"Why the creek?"

“He can’t buck chest deep in water, and there’s not much chance of him hurting himself or you.”

“What do we need?”

“Do the mules ride?”

“Yes.”

“Get the off mule. He’s half a hand taller, and we’ll go get wet.”

He turned and led Lexi away like that was that. Sure was bossy! Go on now, girl, and do what I say.

Except the way he said it and how he’d tamed the stallion...the thought of her finally riding the horse, keeping him...all made her want to play along.

So she humored him.

Butterflies fluttered in her tummy. Ride Sir Lexington! Her mother would die if she knew Marah even thought about it!

Without a word, he led Lexi beside her. She took the mule through two pastures and all the way to the water’s edge wondering what part Old Mo would play, but she wasn’t about to ask. He pulled off his boots and nodded toward hers. She followed suit.

With hardly any effort, he threw himself onto Mo’s back.

Grabbing a handful of stubby mane, he extended the other toward her. The whole time hanging onto the rope.

“Get on behind me.”

Been years since she’d ridden bareback, but why not? She grasped his hand, and he pulled her up as if a child. The mule stepped off the bank into the water. To her amazement, Lexi followed right along.

Charley eased the mule to where Mo stood side by side with the horse. “Get on.”

Her heart pounded. She filled her lungs. “You sure about this?”

“I am, but if you aren’t comfortable, I can go first.”

“No.” She put a hand on his shoulder, lifted her leg and eased over onto her horse’s back.

He flinched once, and shuddered, but nothing else. He just stood there with her sitting his back! She leaned over and patted his neck. “What a good boy you are. Yes, sir, you sure are.” After loving on him a while, she sat back and looked to the man. “Now what?”

“Nudge him forward a bit. Turn him and bring him back.”

With her insides churning, she clucked and pressed her knees into Lexi’s chest. He walked forward. She rope-turned him, and he followed her orders to the tee. Tension rushed out of her and she breathed. Wow. She could hardly believe it.

“Want to ride him out?”

“Is he going to buck me off?”

“Don’t think so.”

She would have preferred a saddle, but didn’t want to appear to

be a helpless ninny, so she nodded, extending her hand. "Give me the rope."

A knife materialized in his hand. He cut it, leaving a six foot or so length attached to the halter he'd so adeptly fashioned. He draped the remainder across the mule's neck then leaned over and tied the loose end to the make shift halter.

"Plow horse him for now. We'll teach him to rein later."

The man pulled the mule around, and Mo walked out of the water.

She nudged Lexi's ribs, and he followed the man. Once out, he shook the water off. A fine spray wet most parts of her that had been dry. She nudged him again, and he broke into an easy trot.

Then just like he was born to do, he stretched out his long legs and galloped toward the far fence. She squeezed with her legs and held to his mane along with the rope.

She loved it! Her peripheral vision blurred, but she focused right between his ears. If the thrill of it didn't burst her chest, she might actually live through the exhilarating experience, and if she didn't, then it was well worth every minute of it.

Oh, she loved it! She'd forgotten how much fun riding bareback was.

Though she couldn't post without stirrups, she didn't feel the need. Lexi's stride was smooth and easy, seemed effortless. He turned and neared the fence then continued around the pasture.

That he hadn't offered to go over it offered some relief, although it probably would've been just as much fun.

She didn't want him to hurt himself.




Charley bounced on the mule straight to the far gate then jumped off. Marah's hair had come loose. The wind in her face kept it back, trailing her like Sir Lexington's tail, but hers far more beautiful. As Uncle Henry was want to say, mercy!

He'd never seen anything like it.

Shame she wasn't Lacey Rose.

Chapter Twenty-one



Once back in the barn, Charley put the mule in its stall then hurried to the back doors. What a sight. Couldn't tell who was having more fun, the lady or her horse.

After seven or ten laps—he'd lost count—Lexi slowed, made one last victory lap, then decelerated to an easy walk. Marah steered him toward the barn.

Stepping aside as she neared and passed, he admired the duo again. The musty aroma of horse sweat filled the hall. She slipped off the stallion, keeping a hold on the rope.

"Thank you. I'd forgotten how much fun riding bareback could be. And for Lexi..." Her eyes glistened with fresh tears. "Really, thank you so much. I love this big ol' baby."

"You're welcome." He considered telling her how much fun he had watching her, but perhaps he ought to save that. Instead, he smiled. "Best walk him out, cool him down some."

She nodded, untied one side of the halter, then gave him a come hither flip of her mane. "Walk with us. I'd love to hear how you learned to do what you did. Never saw anything like it."

"Well, thank you." He fell in next to her. "After the big fight, when the People split and came out of the mountains, the elders claimed they became brothers with the horse."

She glanced at him. "What people? What does that mean?"


"The Comanche."

"Oh, yes. You're that Charley. Sorry, I forgot."

"Ever seen a man shoot an arrow from under a pony's neck at full gallop?"

"No! That would be impossible."

A chuckle escaped for her adamancy. "Been years, but I've done it."



Marah hated braggarts, but if a man could do a thing... What was that called? "We'll leave that for another day, but explain to me about shooting an arrow from under a horse's neck."

Oh, and at a full gallop, can't forget that part." She grinned. "What does it have to do with anything?"

"When you break a horse, if you crush his spirit, you can't trust him with your life, but if he's your brother, then he'll do whatever you

ask.”

Unbelievable, the man and his whoppers.

For some strange reason, she could not bring herself to any firm conclusion about the imposter, but he definitely tamed Lexi for her, and so easily. She glanced back at her horse. The magnificent beast walked behind them, appearing completely content.

She'd forgotten all about not turning her back on him. But he didn't seem to even remember how he'd loved taking hunks out of everyone.

Studying Charley as long as she dared, she faced front again.

“Back to my original question. How'd you do it?”

“Made him want to join my mare band.”

She glared. Was he toying with her or just being ignorant? “And pray tell what is that supposed to mean?”

“When running free, the herd is comprised of mare bands. The matriarch will have five or six daughters or sisters that are submissive to her. Their foals either submit, or she runs them off. She's especially hard on bad acting colts. Sir Lexington had never been made to mind. You bribed him with treats, and that's the only reason he tolerated you.”

“What about the stallions?”

“The older, stronger ones try to gather as many mare bands as possible. Never personally seen one with more than three. His full time job is to fight off any intruders, especially another stallion.”

“How'd you learn all this?”

“From the elders, and my brothers.”

“Your horse brothers?”

Without words, he answered in the affirmative.

“But, according to the novel, you and your mother were rescued when you were only four years old.”

“A long four though. My earliest memory is of first father holding me atop his best pony.”

“What's a long four?”

“More than four and half, closer to five. The People marked time by the seasons. I was four winters and a summer when Levi Baylor and...”

She waited...and waited. “And what? Why'd you stop talking?”

He exhaled. “I should stop calling my partner's name. I miss him bad enough as it is.”

The pain in his voice and eyes appeared real. Could he really be who he claimed?

Great actors working on stage could play any part, convince the audience they actually were Hamlet or King Lear or any other character. She'd heard of the good ones—and had seen most of them

on Broadway or in one of the Washington theaters.

But she'd never known of one who fit the guy's description or age. "So you were a long four when the Rangers rode into Bold Eagle's village?"

"Yes, ma'am, but it wasn't really a village. It was called a peace camp. We'd only been there less than a moon. First father had been to the Tehuacana Creek councils—Sam Houston's peace talks. After he returned, the Rangers came with the government agents. That's when he traded Mother and me to Levi Baylor."

How did he know all these details? She faced him. "What about your real father? Did you ever spend any time with him?"

"Only saw him twice. That time when Levi and Mama found out he was married and had another family. Then I went with a load of timber to Saint Louis when I was sixteen. He was still buying from Uncle Henry."

He stiffened his back and looked ahead like he really didn't want to talk about the man.

But he'd peaked her curiosity. "Did you see him then?"

"Yes, I asked why he'd married my mother when he already had a wife."

"What did he say?"

"At first, he only shrugged and stood there with his head hanging. Finally, he looked me in the eye and smiled. Told me couldn't help himself, that he knew it was wrong, but my mother was the most desirable female he'd ever laid eyes on. And well, that he thought he could make it work. Support her in Texas, without abandoning his wife and two little girls in Saint Louis."

For the next lap around the paddock, she couldn't think of anything she wanted to ask. The horseman had to be who he said he was, and she worked at believing such a thing.

And maybe the knowing so much about his life...urged her to tell him hers. It pressed stronger on her with each step.

Was she interested in him? She loved the sound of his voice, definitely not hard to look at or be with.

If only she could be sure he really was May Meriwether's nephew. "How old are you, Charley?"

"Twenty-four."

She snickered. "Is that a long or short twenty-four?"

He smiled. "Does it matter?"

"Not really. I'm older either way."

He didn't respond. Why wasn't he asking her age? She reached the barn's big door, stepped back, and rubbed on Lexi's chest. Cool enough. "Open his stall."

"Yes, ma'am." He hurried in and held the gate like a groom or

something. She couldn't imagine Curry acting like a servant, or... Why had she thought of him? She walked into the stall, turned her stallion around, then untied his makeshift halter.

Such a magnificent animal, her Sir Lexington! She loved on his neck and ran her hand over where she'd been sitting, separating and fluffing his hair. "There you go, Lexi, you're such a good man."

Charley tossed in an armful of hay, closing the door behind her once out. He strolled toward the front double doors, but stopped and faced her. "Can I ask a personal question?"

Here it came. He couldn't stand not knowing her age. "Go ahead. I may not answer."

"Fair enough. I been wondering. Are you making any money raising thoroughbreds?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

He shot her a little boy grin. Could the man look any more desirable? "If you are, then perhaps you might want to spend some of it to free up more of your time."

"What are you talking about? I don't trust my horses' care to strangers."

"No, not hiring help. Half your time is spent on watering."

"So? They like to drink same as us."

Why didn't he just say what was on his mind?

"Well, if you're making money, maybe you might be interested in a water system. Really wouldn't cost that much."

She'd heard about such, but didn't know anything about it or anyone who did. "I make a few greenbacks selling horses. Tell me more about it. Have you ever put one in?"

Through dinner and the afternoon feeding he shared his idea with her. The more he talked, the better she liked it. That night after supper—Cookie had outdone herself—maybe she was showing off for Charley.

Marah invited the Texan to have a nightcap in the parlor. The day's warmth had faded, but not enough to warrant a fire.

She poured then handed him two fingers worth of brandy. He rolled it in the glass then smelled it. For some reason, she'd obviously broke out her best. Maybe she tried to do a little of her own impressing. "Have any idea what your system will cost?"

"No, but if I can find what I need in Danbury, it shouldn't be all that much. Exception would be the engine and pump. Those are liable to set you back. Too bad Elijah Eversole isn't here. He could cast both."

"Should I know him?"

"Guess not unless you've read Aunt May's last novel, *Daughters*."

She sipped her drink and studied on the man. Most males his age

she would consider a boy, but Nightingale seemed like an old soul, way older than his years.

Though now and again, he'd shown her flashes of the child in him, the Charley she knew. "Tell me something. And by the way, I'm twenty-nine."

He smiled. "Is that a long or short twenty-nine?"

She returned his mirth. "Short."

He grinned even bigger. "What are you wanting to know?"

"This morning at breakfast. Exactly what was it you said in Comanche?"

For too many ticks of the grandfather clock in the hall, he stared. But eventually, his lips thinned. He faced her, and his eyes bore into her soul. She blinked, and he spoke.

"I said your beauty shames the morning."

His words washed over her.

She had a mirror, and knew full well that her features were not all that appealing. Not anymore. Especially now that leathery skin and crow's feet circling her eyes replaced the bloom of her fleeting youth. She grinned. "Such a flatterer."

He drained his glass, stood, then shook his head. "No, I'm not." He tipped his hat—except he wasn't wearing one—then strolled out of the room.

Her heart boomed. Her breath came hard. What in the world?

How ridiculous.

Then again, had she ever known a man like the Texan?



One o'clock in the afternoon on Friday, the thirteenth day of May, found Lacey Rose on the square at the best eatery in Glenn Falls, toying with her plate of pasta, letting herself be mesmerized by Nathaniel Smithson.

The Humphries took seats a respectable two tables over at the older woman's insistence.

"We should give you young people some privacy." Mother Humphries patted Lacey's cheek.

The deacon put his fork down, tore off a piece of bread, then dipped in the saucer of seasoned olive oil. "Would you care to accompany me to the Convention next month?"

She glanced at Mother Humphries then back. Why was she so concerned about what the old dear thought of her? Lacey could come and go as she pleased, except she hated the thought of disappointing the woman.

Probably she'd taken the place in her heart as the grandmother

she'd never had. "No thank you, sir. It wouldn't be proper at all for us to travel together."

"I agree, and it warms my soul that you answered in such a manner. And that's why I've asked my cousin who has agreed to go with us. All dependent, of course, on if we can locate a benefactor."

Just as she'd suspected. She lay down her fork and sat back. "So is that why I'm invited? To finance this trip?"

He grinned. "Partly, I won't deny it. But I couldn't think of another person in the world I'd rather go with, even if you are not inclined to donate to the cause."

She turned her attention to her meal again. So. He readily admitted it. "What's your trade, Mister Smithson?"

"Nate, please. If you won't be offended, neither will I." His face hardened as though she'd insulted him by not jumping at his proposal.

"Fine. Nate it is. How do you feed yourself?"

"My brother and I inherited an apple orchard. We manufacture cider, sauce, butter, and of course, sell apples. However, regarding politics, we don't see eye to eye. And he's the elder...."

"I see...and understand your predicament. Have I met your cousin?"

"No, she lives in New York. Runs a market that sells all of our products. She's more rabid than I—if that's possible—about ending this war."

"And is she needing a benefactor as well?"

"No, but her purse is limited."

"Tell me true, are you married? Do you have a wife hidden out anywhere?"

He grinned. "I do enjoy a lady who speaks her mind right out. No holds barred. To answer your question, no. I'm single and have never indulged in matrimony."

It might not be acceptable, and she hated to ask, but out the man's own mouth.... "Any children?"

He held her eyes. A pain tinged his as if she crossed some intolerable line. "No, none that I know of." His tone remained flat and the pain morphed into insult.

"Your offer is intriguing. What are the dates of this conference of yours?"

"First week of June. My preference would be attending the whole week, but voting doesn't start until the sixth. It will end the following day."

Studying him, she looked him square in the eye. He matched her gaze, but his expression reminded her in ways of young Mister Briggs before she kissed the boy.

Hmm. Did she really want to spend a week with the deacon and

his cousin?

If indeed there was a cousin.

Slicing through the chicken breast, she cut off a bite and speared some pasta. She smiled then ate the delicious entree. He returned his attention to his plate as well.

Once she swallowed, she took a long drink of water, washing it down. "I'll consider your proposal, Nate, and tell you my decision at church on Sunday."

Chapter Twenty-two

On the way home from her delicious Italian dinner, Lacey Rose found out there was indeed a cousin.

Older than Nate by six or ten years, said relative moved to New York after her beau jilted her for a younger girl. Nice enough, but....

Mother Humphries patted her hand. "She was never a looker. Nothing like you, dear. Oh my, you're about the prettiest widow we've ever had here in Glenn Falls."

Lacey bowed slightly then mouthed a thank you, but knew better. A mirror told a more accurate truth than a kind old lady. The only reason Nate asked her to go with him was the money.

Basically, Harold's gift to her because she looked like his dead wife. "Mother, did you know Mister Longstreet's first wife?"

"Oh yes, of course, dear. The poor thing. They were married barely a full year, then she and the boy died. Such a frail little slip of a thing, she just wasn't strong enough. The Longstreets always had big babies." She lifted her hand and held it. "You and she do favor, but she was always so pale and sickly."

That night, Lacey woke from a dream that taunted from the very edge of her memory. It troubled her that she couldn't remember it. In it, she'd seen or heard something important, just knew it in her knower.

That's what her mother used to call it.

Said the Comanche put great stock in that inner voice.

What was she doing thinking about Bear Fang's white squaw? Where would she be now if she'd gone west instead of east?

Most likely, some chief's third wife like her Aunt Rose.

Sunday morning she woke with a start. But that time, she remembered. Two nights in a row, the same dream visited. Did that mean it was true?

Could crazy old Man Dithers be trying to tell her something important? She threw on her housecoat and hurried to the kitchen. The Humphries sat across from each other, having breakfast.

Coffee and small talk ensued until they finished their plates, then the mister went to fetch more wood for the cookstove.

"Mother, does Mister Dithers ever...uh... Could someone...uh... pay him to tell them something?"

"Oh no, dear, not that I know of. He isn't a fortune teller at all. Those gypsy types are an abomination far as scriptures are concerned. God doesn't want His children consulting with the likes."

“I’ve never heard that. As far as I know, there weren’t any of those people in Texas. Well then, do you suppose I might stop by his place for a visit?”

“I don’t think that would be wise, dear. He doesn’t ever talk to anyone. Martha, she’s in my quilting circle, a few years older than Mister and me. Anyway, she remembered the old man coming to church once when she was just knee high to a grasshopper.”

“But that would be over sixty years ago. How could it be possible?”

“Precisely.” She shivered then hiked one shoulder. “But she recalls it clear as it happened yesterday. The man, looking much as he does today with his uncombed white hair and scraggly beard, walked in right during the middle of the preacher’s sermon and pointed his finger at the minster then shouted, ‘Repent.’ ”

Lacey waited for more of the tale, but her cook didn’t go on. “That’s mighty brazen. Repent of what? Do you know?”

“Well, no one knew at the time, but come to find out, once the feathers settled, he had himself a hid-a-way woman. According to Martha, the minister called Dithers a liar and claimed he had nothing to repent of.”

“What happened then?”

“You should hear her tell it in person.” Mother Humphries giggled like a little girl. “She tells it with such flair! But supposedly, the old man threw both his arms into the air and continued in a voice loud enough to be heard down the lane. ‘Lord, choose between me and this wolf in sheep’s clothing!’”

Lacey leaned in closer. “Oh my. I can certainly see why your friend would remember the incident. What happened then?”

“Why, the minster dropped dead that same afternoon in the arms of the woman who wasn’t his wife.”

The back door opened, and a gust of cool wind swept in ahead of the mister. By that time in Texas, it would have scorched your chin whiskers if you had any. The old boy carried an armload of wood.

Mother winked then jumped up. “You get yourself ready, dear, while I cook you some breakfast.”

On the way to town, Lacey made up her mind. She’d pay her and Nate’s way to Baltimore. Might even buy his cousin a meal or two.

Like a little kid waiting for his father to get home from a long trip, Nate met the carriage then helped her down.

“I like that dress. Blue is your color.”

She took his arm. “Thank you. Harold used to say the same thing.”

He stopped and stepped aside. “Turns out going to Baltimore might be a fool’s errand. Got word yesterday the Radical Republicans have split from the party. Lincoln’s crowd has joined with the War

Democrats and formed the National Union Party. The Radicals are meeting in Cleveland on the thirty-first."

"So Lincoln will get the nomination?"

"Not necessarily. Some are putting forth Hannibal Hamlin's name as a compromise."

"Who's that?"

He grinned. "The vice president."

"Oh." Lacey looked off, wishing she hadn't shown her lack of political savvy. The faithful streamed toward the meeting hall. She looked back. "I still would like to go. See for myself if Mister Dithers is right."



Surprised Marah how fast Charley progressed on her new water system. The cost had escalated, but not having to pump water by hand then haul it to each pasture would save so much time and effort, she could hardly imagine.

The whole plan proved simple really, once he showed her how it would work.

Almost to hilarity, Cookie remained skeptical, but the Texan kept reassuring her that water would be running into her washtub soon enough.

Marah found him in the pump house he'd built on the barn's west outside wall. She didn't say anything, just watched him work for a few seconds.

But he must have sensed her standing there and turned. "Afternoon."

"How's it coming?"

"Seems all I've done today is fix leaks, but I'm almost finished."

"Really? We'll have running water today?"

A grin and a nod told her everything she wanted to know. "It's been working for the last hour, but I keep having to shut the water off, keeps on leaking. But I think I've got them all fixed now."

A stray thought came home to roost. "What about when you're not here? What do I do then if it leaks?"

"Wilhelm's been helping. He's handy."

"That's great. Oh, got a note from Mother. She's coming next Wednesday, wants to get the convention results, then she said she'd take the first train back. Wants Wilhelm at the station. Will you help me remember?"

"Yes, ma'am." His tone sounded submissive, but his eyes belied his words.

"Why are you looking like that?"

"Like what?"

Ooo, she hated it when he did that.

The young man infuriated her sometimes with the littlest things. Like saying she was beautiful, yet he hadn't even tried to hold her hand much less anything else. "You know how you were looking." He better watch it, she might just have to slap the truth out of him.

Rattling off something in the 'People's tongue,' he winked. Him speaking Comanche, she hated even more. "You know I don't like that."

"Sorry." He grinned. "I do, but you don't like me telling you how pretty you are."

She backed up a step.

Her leg bumped into something.

Glancing down, she discovered a five quart feed bucket full of water. Like the time she was twelve and Curry fifteen, she hoisted the pail and threw the water on him. Taken by complete surprise, he gasped then stared at her.

Was he angry? She grinned. "Uh oh."

Jumping between her and the door, he grabbed her wrist. "You've done it now." He pulled her to his chest, pressing his wet shirt into her dry blouse.

"You're getting me all wet." She giggled and squirmed, but his hold on her only tightened. His free hand around her back held her even closer. He stared into her eyes. At first, she matched his gaze, then had to look away.

The boy-man's eyes probed where she allowed no one. She brought her lips up close to his, but he didn't kiss her.

Instead, the hand on her back climbed and worked at freeing her hair while he kept a tight grip with the other.

"Well?" She managed that one word, but her voice threatened to fail her.

"Well what?" His breath warmed her cheeks.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"No. Not yet." He continued freeing her locks.

Wriggling, she blew back on him. "Why not? You've been telling me how beautiful I am in two languages for weeks now."

With the last of her tresses free and falling, he released her and plunged both his hands in it. He fluffed it out twice then brought long strands over each of her shoulders. She could run, if not for being paralyzed.

He put one hand back on the small of her back and pulled her in tight. Besides, she'd be a fool to go.

Burying his face into her hair and neck, he held her. Then he came up as if for breath and breathed deeply. No deeper than he looked into her eyes though.

Fingertips on her forehead, he guided her hair away from her face and put his lips on hers...kissed her ever so softly.

She kissed back harder and moved her arms to hold him tighter.

Too soon, he broke it off.

Playing with her hair, he teased her. "Tell me your life."

"My life?" She tried to match his gaze, but couldn't. Looking down, pressed against his chest, she shook her head. "Nothing to tell."

"You cry yourself to sleep most nights, Marah. Why?"

Her cheeks burned. Who did that guy think he was? She pushed away. "Have you been eavesdropping?"

"Not at all. My room is only two doors down. Who's Curry?"

"What difference does it make, Charley? Why do you want to know?" She was free. She should go. So why weren't her legs running? Her feet carrying her away far and fast?

The bright light standing before her held her in place, drawing as if she were a gnat. A magnet, he drew her like a nail. Her head fell again, she couldn't stand his scrutiny.

"I need to know." He lifted her chin. "Are you married? Is Curry your husband?"

This time she wouldn't look away. "He was. He died in the first Battle of Bull Run. My son is Curry, too, though. He's fourteen. Away at school. We don't get along."

Though the words came out of her mouth, she couldn't believe they'd taken voice. The speaking making them true, when she never... wanted to ever... Why was she telling this man her life?

"How long ago?"

"Three years...next month." What kind of allure did he have over her? She stepped closer and unhooked his top button.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

"If I can't find Lacey Rose..." He smiled, but his eyes held no mirth.

She wanted him to finish, but dared not ask.

Even more, she wanted him.



Deep into the wee hours, Charley sat by his bedroom window staring into the starlit night. His brandy tumbler long empty as his flask, but he'd determined to save Pauleen's bottle.

Never mind how much he'd like another drink. His heart had some searching to do and needed him clear.

The two ladies were so different, and neither Lacey Rose, yet he found them so desirable. Married Pauleen presented no option at all;

for sure, she'd never leave Albany.

And did Marah only desire someone to help her forget her dead husband? Would she consider leaving all that and moving to Texas?

What if he couldn't find Lacey?

What if he did?

The girl he'd known all her life had soiled herself with the blackmailer, and now was consorting with the gambler. Was she even the same person? No. A lady now, she'd be twenty. No doubt she would govern her own actions, whether or not she'd return home. Might not even want to go back.

Could he convince her?

Freddie would come in another four days. Would she bring news of Lacey? Hadn't indicated to her daughter if she'd heard anything, but maybe the publisher could only say it to his face? Could it be that bad?

No. He refused to let himself think that.

He would find her, and he would take her home. Like Wallace told him.

A cock's crow jerked him upright. He blinked until realization dawned. The rooster called again. Another at least a mile away answered. He pushed himself out of the chair and eased on downstairs.

Cookie and Wilhelm sat the breakfast table. She acted like she was going to get up, but he held his hand out and stayed her, smiling.

"I can get my own coffee."


Halfway through his second cup, Marah strolled in. A smile graced her beautiful face. Her hair so wild, it begged his fingers to tame it.

She slid in next to him then bumped his leg with her knee. "Good morning."

"Morning. You're looking extra gorgeous this fine day."

She laughed then pressed her knee against his even harder. "I know better, but I admit, I do enjoy hearing you say such things."

Chapter Twenty-three



The gavel came down, ending the Convention.

Whoops and hollers followed with backs slapped all around. Lacey stood and stepped into the aisle. Nate's cousin joined her, and with the older woman by her side, she made her way out of the Front Street Theater.

If the smoke cloud in the balcony where they'd made her sit had been any thicker, she couldn't have seen the bean pole or his cronies in action.

Exactly like Mister Dithers predicted.

Lincoln and his supporters celebrated his nomination for a second term. Even worse, according to Nate, Andrew Johnson had replaced Vice President Hannibal Hamlin on the ticket. She hated politics, but she hated the war even more.

For sure and certain, slavery was wrong, but killing each other—their own countrymen—over it proved much worse.

Nate hardly said five words on the train. His normal magpie cousin sat even quieter, both obviously concerned and in deep thought. But still, if the old man was right, she could find solace in that the horrible combat would end, be over by the next year.

Then what? Would she return to Texas?

Had Charley survived?

Could she ever make him understand?

Did she even want to try? Glenn Falls had grown on her.

Surely her barristers would successfully settle Harold's estate on her behalf. Make the bankers give her the money he meant her to have. Nathaniel seemed nice enough, but what might he think about her once he knew the whole truth?

Being a half-breed might quench every spark of interest. She hated it.

Twenty-eight hours and countless train changes later found her in her own bed hunting sleep. So exhausted, yet her mind whirled. If only she could talk with someone she trusted. Someone wise.

The guardians of Harold's property, she'd trust with her life, but the Humphries, as dear as she held them, were simple folk.

No doubt, she'd wait for her money. She wanted that, and he'd wanted her to have it. Had he sensed his end near? Could that have been why he felt like everything must be rushed? So what if she did get it? Then what? Pine over Charley the rest of her days?

Should she see him again before any decision....

A yawn overtook her. Turning onto her side, she cuddled her pillow.

As so many other recent night visions, she found herself in the great room looking out the huge wall of windows.

Suddenly Mister Dithers appeared, but instead of way off on the mountain where he usually beckoned her to come, he stood just outside. He pointed his bony finger at her and spoke to her soul.

“Repent. Return to your first love, and He will make all things new.”

She sat up in bed. “Repent? Of what?”

“Rebellion. Whoredom. Thievery and lying.” Though now wide awake, with her fingers plugging her ears, she couldn’t escape. The old man’s words echoed in her heart, through her soul, and even in the room, as if physically spoken.

How could that be?

An image of her mother flitted across her mind’s eye, but instead of her hateful last words, she spoke softly of how her arms longed to embrace her only child. She held them out like she wanted Lacey to come.

“Oh, Mama! I’m so sorry I ran off.”

She slipped out of bed and fell to her knees beside it. “Forgive me, Jesus. I was so wrong. All the way back to that kiss. I...I...only wanted him to...”

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“But it was wrong. I never should have left home. I let Jack use me, then Harold. I see that so clearly now! Mister Dithers is right. I helped them both cheat and steal. Forgive me, Father.”

Like heated honey dribbled on top a stack of flapjacks, a warmth flowed over her. From the top of her head, the comfort ran down and blanketed her. “I’ve made so many mistakes, but I want to start over, give my life back to You.”

If she hadn’t known better, she’d have sworn strong arms held her. And not just on the outside. The heat poured deep into her heart until filled then continued through the whole of her being.

Ever hotter and more intense as it went, the heat surging through her became a cleansing fire. The imagined embrace ended, and she sniffed, wiping her face with her gown’s sleeve, but the warmth remained.

There on her knees, she knew it.

Never had she been so free.

She was clean on the inside again exactly like that first time she gave her heart to Him when she was nine years old. But that seemed a lifetime ago, and now, He made everything new once more.

How could she have strayed so far away from the One—the only

One—Who loved her unconditionally?

How long she'd remained kneeling there, blessing and praising the Almighty, she didn't know.

But in time, the bed and its covers drew her. She slipped back in between the sheets, pulling the quilt under her chin, and continued to praise the Lord.

The minute her eyes closed, she stood in the great room again.

"The Lord says choose wisely, Daughter."

She turned around. The old man stood by the hearth warming his hands by the fire. The flickering light haloed his hair, as wild as ever.

He smiled. "While the gambler's child will be a man of God, it is your second son who is called to greatness...as is his son after him."

She opened her mouth with so many questions swirling in her head, so much she wanted to ask, but before any words came, Dithers, along with the blaze he'd warmed himself by, vanished.

Not even a hint of smoke or ember remained. Her hand went to her belly. So her suspicions bore truth.

She carried Harold's child.

Choose wisely.

What did he mean by that?



Seemed no matter how hard she tried to leave town early for a nice visit, Freddie ended up not making it until Friday. That evening, not much had changed, but she'd determined she would get out of the city.

It surprised her to see both Marah and Charley waiting on the station's platform. Once she stepped off and could see her daughter's face, Freddie allowed herself a little smile.

"Sorry I didn't get here sooner."

A light kiss on the cheek welcomed her home. When was the last time she'd gotten any affection from her daughter? "Well, we were, too, Mother, but we'll forgive you. You're here now. So it's Lincoln again?"

"So it seems. I hate it that he dumped Hamlin. The president seems resolved to fight this war to the last man."

Charley nodded toward the train. "How many bags, ma'am?"

During the short ride home, Marah gushed about the water system Charley had installed. So...as she thought.

The young man had made the difference in her girl. It tickled her how even more than the telling, the almost constant glances she shot toward the adorable little Charley, all grown up driving the carriage, made her admiration clear.

“Where’s Wilhelm?”

“Apparently, he has a new female friend. Charley remains mum other than to say the boy needed the evening off, and that he’d be happy to meet the train.”

Freddie hiked her eyebrows, winked, then mouthed ‘are you and him’? She nodded twice toward the Texan.

Marah shrugged and mouthed back, later.

As always, being at the farm thrilled her and warmed her heart. She loved being home. Shame she couldn’t merge her two worlds, but nothing compared to New York and publishing.

Perhaps one day, she’d tire of the hustle and bustle and come home for good. But until then....

The ‘later’ that her daughter promised came while she unpacked her bags. Marah swept in like a young lady needing a boon.

“We’re alone now. What about you and Charley?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s a wonderful, intelligent, handsome young man, but he’s five years younger, and....” She sighed.

Freddie grinned. “And what? You’re acting like a school girl.”

“I am not. He did kiss me—once. But... I think he’s in love with Lacey Rose.”

“What about you? Where’s your heart?”

“On a battlefield?” Her daughter flopped on the bed. “No, I know what you’re asking... And I suppose I could do worse.”

“What does that mean? Do you –”

“Oh, Mother. You’ve read too many dime novels.”

“Sweetheart, that’s what pays the bills. So? Tell me, Marah. Are you falling in love with our young Texan?”

“I don’t know, Mother. Maybe.”

After a wonderful meal from Cookie, she poured herself a brandy and headed to the parlor to enjoy a little pleasant discussion. While nursing her second brandy, it hit her.

“Oh, Charley! I almost forgot. I should have told you first thing. Longstreet is dead.”



Her words shocked Charley. “What of Lacey Rose?”

“She was with him. They’d just come from the theater, one of the smaller ones at the end of Broadway. A thief robbed them. Longstreet got stabbed in the stomach and died the next day. Lacey shot the man in the leg. The coppers found him a week later bloated and stinking. No one seems to know the whereabouts of Mis’ess Longstreet.”

“They were married?”

“That’s what the detective said she claimed. But once they found

the dead thief with a hole in his leg, the police closed the case.”

Charley nursed his drink while the conversation shifted to politics. He didn't care about any of it. Lacey Rose had married Longstreet. And now, she was a widow. All alone. A strong desire to pack his bag and catch the next train almost overwhelmed him, but to go where?

Could she still be in New York?

“Miss Freddie.”

She looked his way and smiled. “Yes?”

“Anyway you could get a letter or telegram to Texas?”

Her smile vanished. She looked over his head for a bit then shrugged. “I can try. I know a man in Saint Louis who might help. I'll write him. See what he thinks.”

“Good, I'll have a short note ready when you leave.”

On Sunday evening after Marah showed off riding Sir Lexington around the back paddock, Wilhelm hooked up the carriage and loaded Freddie's bags.

Both he and Marah offered to go to the station with her, but the publisher refused. “No need. We can say our goodbyes right here.” She held out both arms toward Charley, and he walked into her embrace. She smelled of lilac and roses.

He kissed her cheek and stepped back. “Thank you so much for your help. If you hear anything else....”

“Of course, dear.”

He pulled his note out and extended it. “Hopefully, your friend can forward this on to Aunt May.”

She put the letter in her clutch. “Yes, I'm certain it will be welcome news back in Texas.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Now I want you to listen to me. No matter what, don't come to the city until the draft gangs are gone. I'll let you know when.”

Oh, yes, he'd forgotten about them. “Yes, ma'am. Thank you for the reminder.”

With a smile, she patted his cheek. Looked like for a minute, she might hug him again...or worse, but she finally faced Marah and embraced her daughter instead. “Baby, you be careful with that stallion. I'd just as soon you sell him.”

“If you do, I want him. I'd love to take him to Texas. Uncle Henry would be so jealous.”

Both ladies snickered. They sounded so much alike. Marah shook her head though. “No, sir. Lexi stays right here with me. I can hardly wait until the fall and the first chase. That fox doesn't stand a chance.”

While the groom drove her away, Charley watched. Sure had been a good idea to contact Aunt May's publisher. He'd never dreamed....

Marah slipped her hand into his and squeezed. “Fancy a night

cap?"



All the way to the parlor, Marah hung onto to his hand.

At the sidebar, she stopped, and he took the far chair. She poured two tumblers half full then handed him his. She wanted to slip into his lap, but took the overstuffed rocker across from him and held her glass out and up. "Cheers."

He raised his drink but didn't say anything.

Two gulps in, she couldn't hold her tongue any longer. "What did your note say?"

For several sips, he appeared to be deciding if she'd crossed the line. As if one little kiss didn't entitle her to pry. He hiked one shoulder ever so slightly and cleared his throat.

"Told Auntie I'd tracked Lacey to New York. That I was fine and not in need of money. Wanted her to know I'd contacted your mother, and she could pass any message through her."

Pained her heart he hadn't mention her, but then again, what was she to him? "Any idea what you're going to do next?"

"Thought I'd build you a bath house."

"What? Charlie Nightingale, you are full of surprises. That is not what I expected you to say. Oh, that would be wonderful! But no, you can't. What about Lacey?"

"Once Miss Freddie gives me an all clear, I'll go look for her."

"So...you're here until the end of the war?"

"Hopefully, it won't be that long. Just until the draft squads are satisfied."

"That might be the end of the war, you know. Anyway, where would you start?"

"Find Longstreet's grave, and..." He scratched his ear and exhaled. "Go from there."

She wasn't sure how he figured a grave would help, but didn't want to talk about Lacey or Longstreet any more. The idiot marrying the man hadn't deterred Charley from finding her one bit. She'd hoped....

"A bath house you say? Sounds luxurious. What does it entail?"

Launching into a much too complicated explanation, including what it would take and a description of how it would look and function.

Other than the location—she wanted it closer to the house than he planned—his plan, as she followed it, sounded great. He finished talking, drained his glass, then set it on the table.

"Want a refill?"

He held his tumbler out. "I'd love one."

She jumped up, filled his three quarters full and refreshed hers.

After a good-sized sip, he leaned back in his chair and stared into her eyes. "A question, if I may?"

For a dozen heartbeats, she lost herself in his gaze, then her mouth—or was it the brandy?—answered. "Ask away."

"How did you come to be married at fourteen?"

Lands to Goshen, her and her big mouth. But she shouldn't withhold her past, not if she had any hope of keeping him there. "I wasn't. Curry didn't ask me until after Cyle was born."

"Was the man touched in the head?"

She grinned. "No. He left for Europe before I knew. Mother made me stay here with my grandmother and hoped I'd give Junior up for adoption, but...for me...that was never a consideration."

"Cyle or Junior?"

"Either. Curry Cyle O'Conner, Junior. We married as soon as he got home."

"Why is it you and the boy don't get along?"

The question punched her in the gut. He sure knew how to turn the knife once he stuck it in. Even her mother didn't know the why. But...if she might ever have a chance.... "Before his father came along, I was sweet on our old cook's son, Ike."

Why was she telling this man her life?

"At eighteen, he lived with his mother in our basement. He drove Mother and helped around the house, guess he was like a butler." She picked up her glass and sipped on it while she studied on this stranger who she opened up to as she hadn't to any other human being. What was it about him?

He didn't appear to be judging her or on the verge of bolting, so she continued.

"Right after Curry enlisted, Cyle caught me and Ike...uh...he was comforting me. Junior was eleven then. He...didn't understand. I hated the war from the start and fought with his father over enlisting for weeks. My son...heard it all...took his father's side, of course. After seeing me with Ike.... He hates me."

Draining his drink, Charley stood. "Thank you for telling me."

"Wait. Answer me one question before you go."

"Fair enough. What do you want to know?"

"Do you love Lacey?"

Chapter Twenty-four

The first Sunday back from the convention surprised Lacey Rose. The deacon wasn't in attendance, nor did anyone seem to know his whereabouts.

Three days later, Nate came calling, dressed in his meeting house best and bearing a bouquet of fresh flowers. Once in the great room and relieved of his offering, he extended his hand. She took it.

"Lacey, I know you haven't been a widow long, but my life has changed and...." He knelt on one knee in front of her.

She pulled her hand back. "Wait. Get up."

His eyes widened, but he remained on his knee. "But why? What's wrong?"

"Please sit down. There's something I need to tell you."

Taking the rocker next to the hearth, he sat as she asked, but on the seat's edge.

Her mouth went dry as she tried to find the exact words. Instead of unburdening her heart as the opener, she decided to sate her curiosity. "We missed you at church Sunday. Where have you been?"

He grinned. "That's why I'm here, I've been meeting with John Fremont. He's asked me to help with his campaign."

She'd heard the name before, but couldn't place him. "And who is Fremont again?"

"The Radical Republicans' nomination. He ran in '56, and if we are able to gain enough electors, we can throw the election to the house. Goal being to keep Lincoln from getting a second term."

She didn't know about any of that, and it didn't much matter anyway. She believed Dither's prophesy that the war wouldn't be over until next year. "So you're leaving?"

"Yes, and I hope you'll agree to come with me." He slipped out of the rocker back onto his knee. "As my wife, of course. Marry me, Lacey."

His eyes held a passion, but it wasn't love. She filled her lungs. No way around it, she had to tell him. "Nathaniel...you see...I'm pregnant."

He pushed himself to his feet then retreated to the rocker, sitting all the way back into the chair. "Is it Harold's?"

What a question! "Of course! Why would you think for one minute that the baby isn't his? We were married, after all!"

"Did you know what he was?"

"Yes, of course, I did. He was my husband." She rose and went to

the window, half expecting Mister Dithers to be out there to guide her in the way the Lord would have her go. How dare Smithson! "Harold Longstreet was one of the most kind, generous, and loving men I ever knew."

"He was also a liar and a cheat."

Why had he come? This was no way to win a yes to his proposal. Did he mean to insult her so? Oh, it became clear. He was only after her money—Harold's money!

"Are you aware that he killed his first wife?"

She spun from the calming mountainside and faced him, her cheeks blazing. "Get out! How dare you come into my home and insult me and my deceased husband! I don't ever want to see you again. Go! Get out, I said!"

The front door slammed, and she sank to her knees and wept.

Kind, caring hands patted her back. Sweet, supportive and encouraging words flowed over her, but she couldn't be consoled. She cried for her lost innocence, her dead husband, her restoration to Father God in Heaven.

How had her life spiraled so out of control? And just when she thought things were getting better! God loved her, but had He let them cast her into a pit?

Would she ever find the lasting solace her soul craved?

Oh, sweet Charley, are you even alive?



While Lincoln's war raged in the south, the Texan fought his own battle with her new bath house. Wanted it to be perfect he claimed. Marah had asked him flat out if he loved Lacey, and he'd only shrugged. Told her he didn't know.

Could it be the truth?

She hoped he would elaborate at some point, open up and tell her his life as she'd told him hers. Instead, he'd taken his leave, and ever since, whenever she tried to broach the subject, she could count on him changing the subject or walking again.

But the man never took the bait. Worked himself hard every day and never lingered over a night cap.

As June melted into July, frustrations grew. Truth be known though, she couldn't be sure of her own heart or its intentions. Did desire grow only because he remained so unavailable? Or had she fallen in love? It seemed like it.

Did she still love Curry, or had the handsome young Nightingale stolen her heart away from the man she'd considered her soul mate?

Questions roiled inside, keeping her on edge.

Then to make it worse, a week after the big Fourth of July celebration, her mother sent word.

Everything in her wanted to burn the missive, but she knew better. Just like she couldn't keep Curry from joining the army or Cyle from hating her, it certainly appeared she would soon lose the Texan as well.

Surely when he knew, he wouldn't stay much longer either, especially with her mother offering to let him stay with her. Marah would be alone...again. Maybe if....

That night at supper, after another hard, hot day, Charley put his fork down and smiled. "Cookie, you outdid yourself once again."

"Oh, Mister Charley, you are so kind."

Marah patted his forearm. "Yes, he is." She squeezed. "Want a night cap? Mother sent a bottle of single malt."

"That would be nice."

Waiting until he sat in the rocker and she across from him in the parlor's overstuffed chair with both tumblers half filled, she pulled the letter from her skirt pocket and held it out. "Mother says the Feds have finally stopped drafting men."

He reached over and took her offering. "Any other news? Did Aunt May get my letter?"

"I'm sorry, she didn't say. And nothing about your friend either. Seems the south is getting desperate. They've extended their draft age to seventy. Can you imagine?" Why'd she call Lacey Rose 'your friend'?

Sounded a little removed even to her. But he'd placed and kept Marah at that distance.

It certainly wasn't of her own making or desire.

Shaking his head, he unfolded the page then stared at it long enough to read it multiple times.

So glad she already knew its contents, she sat quietly—if not patiently—and waited.

He finally looked up. "Can you help me tomorrow? In two, three days at most, I can have the bath house finished if you will."

"Then I won't." She loved the expression that elicited and laughed. "You've made it perfect all by yourself, and I'd be a liar if I said I didn't want you to stay no matter how long it took, but of course I'll help you. What do you need me to do?"

"Watch for leaks. It'll save me a lot of steps."

"I can do that."

After he finished his drink, to her dismay, he excused himself. She drained hers then sipped another one, but decided to stop there. A couple more, no telling what she might do. Better to keep her wits... and her honor.

She helped him the next day and the one after that. He'd think he had it ready, then she'd discover another leak.

Finally, on the afternoon of the third day, it all worked, and the only water remained in her tub. She waited for him to return from the pump house, then followed him inside her new bathhouse.

Opening the hot water stopcock, he checked all the pipes and let it run. He looked so cute standing back with his arms crossed over his chest, obviously admiring his handiwork.

Beside the tub, she knelt and put her hand in the water, already wonderfully warm. "You're amazing, Charley."

"Thank you, but it's Uncle Henry who built the first one I saw. He claimed the Romans had baths over two thousand years ago that as many as five hundred people could enjoy at one time. Public fountains where the water ran day and night."

She stood and eased over next to him. "Where'd they get the water that they could waste it in such a manner?"

"Aqueducts brought it from the mountains. Some of them are still standing. Uncle Henry visited there on Aunt May's European book tour."

She'd learned about all that studying and had seen pictures in books, but still liked him telling her about it. A wild idea struck her.

Without any debate, she grabbed him and fell over the edge, pulling them both into the oversized wooden tub. He came up sputtering, wiping water from his face. "You're crazy. Why'd you do that?"

Grinning, she gave him a wink. "Oh, I just figured you needed to be the first one to try it out. And well...I'm all hot and sweaty and..."

Suddenly unsure as to what to say in the moment, she kissed him. For too long, he just stood there, then at last, he kissed her back as the warm water's level rose.



"Sign here, here, and there." The banker pulled his finger away from pages, then leaned back in his chair. Lacey Rose complied then counted out the wad of greenbacks, putting them in neat stacks. He recounted the money.

Did bankers trust anyone? Then he handed over the deed. "If you ever need anything, Miss Longstreet, I'd be pleased if you'd come see me first."

Tired of correcting people, she let the 'miss' go by without correcting him. If the man had half a brain... She put the fancy looking title to her home in her clutch, careful not to bend it, then stood.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll keep that in mind.” She smiled then turned to leave.

“Miss.”

She stopped and faced him. “Yes? Is there something else?”

He jumped up and rushed around his desk. “Perhaps dinner? To celebrate.”

She eyed the man, twice her age at a minimum. Either he leaned toward being a leech or the old boy only wanted to cozy up to her money.

“Sorry, sir. I have a train to catch. My barrister in New York has sent word. It appears all my legal troubles are going to be over in the same week.” She laughed. “If only Harold had thought to leave a will...but who could have possibly known he would be murdered so soon after we wed?”

Took her too long to reach the big city, way past business hours. So instead of going to her lawyer’s office, she headed to her hotel. The day before, in a moment of weakness, she’d wired the Astor and booked a room.

But why not? She was about to be a very well-to-do lady, and why shouldn’t she indulge herself? Her dear departed husband would have wanted her to.

Her first love would never have condoned it, but Harold always traveled first class, claiming it only cost an extra twenty percent.

She was worth it.



Charley put the last of his things in the carpetbag, slung on his money belt and cinched it tight, then faced her.

She sat on his bed, hair rumpled, still in her gown. Oh, how he did love that wild mane of hers. He’d never seen anything like it and would relish a lifetime of just enjoying it, running his fingers through.

How could a female look more desirable? Plus, Marah had a heart of gold. Spoiled? Yes. Opinionated? Sure, but his mother would love her.

“You don’t have to go.”

A deep breath made its way out as a long sigh. “We’ve been over this before. And yes, I do.”

“But he’s dead. You said so yourself. The dead can’t hold you to an order. You found out she’s married and alive. Isn’t that enough?”

“No. I gave my word, and I aim to keep it. Far as Lacey’s concerned, her husband died and left her a widow. She might need help getting back home. Besides, Marah, you’d never want to leave all this for Texas.”

She jumped to her feet and drew within inches of him before

stopping. "Promise me you'll come back. Even if you've got Lacey in tow. Please give me your word this isn't goodbye. As long as I know...."

"I can't, not until I find her. And...."

"And what?"

"I don't know the what. Only that I've got to find her and take her home. I owe Wallace that much."

"What about me? You come in here and steal my heart, and now you're running off. I can bear it if you promise." Tears welled then overflowed and trickled down her cheeks.

He wrapped his arms around her, but he'd delayed long enough.

She snuggled in tight. "I love you, Charley."

Did she?

He kissed the top of her head. "I'm torn, sweet one. But I gave Wallace my word, and we've been partners for better than twenty years. I've got to find Lacey Rose. She's the closest thing to a daughter he ever had. They're all counting on me—Aunt May, Mama, and Miss Laura. I don't want to disappoint them."

She pushed him away, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Oh, but you're fine with disappointing me. Go then! Go find your runaway. But remember this, I love you and...." She sniffed, filled her lungs, then wiped her cheeks. "You can't say what I'd do. Just send me word, and Lexie and I will be on the next train to Texas."

"Do you really mean that?"

"I said it, didn't I?"

He stepped in close and kissed her one last time. Before he succumbed to the temptation to please her, he forced his feet to move. They carried him outside and into the waiting carriage. His own tears flowed, but he couldn't stay.

Not until he found Lacey. Maybe he'd been wrong about loving her, talked himself into it.

But he had to find her.

See with his heart who he loved the most.

Chapter Twenty-five

That next morning, it didn't seem right to Charley being in Freddie's home, especially after what he'd been doing with her daughter the past few days.

But he needed the lady's help, and all the coin he could hang onto helped make the decision to stay. She joined him at the breakfast table after the tenth...or was it a baker's dozen of cock's crows?

"Good morning, Charley."

"Yes, ma'am. Sure is." He resisted Wallace's snarky 'sorry you missed it' response to any late arrival in similar situations. So much reminded him of one of his most favorite people on earth.

"Maybe getting back home and experiencing Uncle's absence firsthand would make his passing more real, but Charley couldn't imagine ever getting completely over his partner being gone.

After he cleaned his full plate and she her dainty bit of nothing with coffee and only the slightest pleasantries of conversation, she smiled at him. Or at least he took it as a smile.

"What are you thinking? Any ideas?"

"Yes, ma'am. I plan on visiting all the morticians until I find the one who buried Longstreet."

As if that was not at all what she expected, she shook her head. "Why them?"

"I mostly thought to find out where the man was buried, go from there."

"What about Glenn Falls?"

"The blackmailer said Longstreet didn't go until the fall, but I figured I'd go there next if I can't find the man's grave. Or even if I do."

"Marah wrote me about the bath house and how much time you saved her with the new water system."

"I was happy to help however I could. After all your hospitality... it was the least I could do. You've helped me so much."

She nodded then extended her hand that held a piece of folded paper. "Here. We want you to have this."

He took the offering then opened it. A bank promissory note, and he couldn't believe the amount. "No. I can't accept this. You don't owe me any money, Miss Freddie. Especially not five hundred dollars."

She reached over and patted his hand. "We want you to have it. Now if you don't need it to get home on, then save it for when you come back. We both want to see you again with or without Lacey."

Though he heard her words, he didn't believe Marah had any interest in laying eyes on Lacey Rose. "Thank you, ma'am. I'll be careful with it. I'd love to come back for a visit, maybe even deliver Aunt May's next manuscript in person."

She chuckled. "You certainly do know how to warm an old lady's heart, dear one. And my daughter...you brought a sparkle back into her eye I wasn't sure would ever return. I'm grateful that in knowing you, she's able to see her life isn't over. Since Curry's demise and Cyle's rejection, she's been so obsessive over those horses."

"She's a superb lady and quite wonderful with those animals. They're definitely a passion." He returned her mirth. "You've done yourself proud in rearing her, ma'am."

Had he told her his heart, or only what she wanted to hear?



Hurry then wait. Lacey Rose hated sitting outside courtrooms, stuffy airless corridors with nothing to do.

The judge having the lawyers for sidebar after sidebar. More likely than not, they all plotted against her. Why hadn't she thought to bring a book or at least buy a newspaper? Except all those rags wrote about those days was that awful war.

Oh, that Mister Dithers could be correct and the dreadful killing would end within the year!

Rubbing her tummy, she heard again the old wild man's prophesy over her son. Called to greatness. She reflected on Mother Humphries' claims on his age. Did they really believe he could be that old?

How could a man live that long and still get around like he did? Maybe he was a prophet, or even an angel.

His prediction that Lincoln would get the nomination definitely proved true. The war lasting until at least next spring seemed inevitable.

If what she'd been hearing about Lee holding off Grant, it didn't seem so certain that it would end that quick, but...

The big double doors opened, and her barrister marched straight toward her then at the last step, veered, and sat beside her.

"They've ask for a continuance."

"What's that? What does it mean?"

"A delay. I objected. The judge asked them to make a new offer. So here we are. The bankers will give us eighty cents on the dollar. That's a lot of money, Miss Longstreet."

"That's letting them steal twenty percent of my money, sir." The look in the man's eyes told her everything she needed to know. "How much are you willing to give up of your fee?"

He chuckled. "Five percent."

She did the math, except it got a bit fuzzy with all the zeros. "Tell the greedy leeches that I'll agree to ninety cents, if you'll reduce your fee by seven and a half."

He patted her knee then left his hand there. "How about eighty-five, and I stay at five off?"

Without saying a word, she glared at his fingers until he removed them. "No, get them to take the ninety and you cut off six and a half."

Two hours later, she signed for eighty-eight cents on the dollar, remembering Miss Jewel telling her the number eight stood for 'new beginnings' in the Bible. And he cut his by six, just to get it all done and over.

Once she signed in all the right places, he stood. "What bank would you prefer your money to be transferred into? I wouldn't recommend you walking around with that much cash."

"Well, I certainly will not be leaving it in theirs, that much I know. Which one do you use?"

"Several, but I like First National the best."

"How far is it?"

He smiled his rather smug grin. "Right across the street."

"Good. We'll stroll right over and set me up an account."



Took Charley two days to find Longstreet's grave. No flowers or other embellishments adorned it, but a fresh Lacey-sized footprint told him she'd visited in the last few days.

Shame it wasn't back home, he could track her to wherever, but with all the brick sidewalks and streets, it wasn't an option.

Going to Glenn Falls was out, not with her being in town, except New York City could hardly be called a town, and hiding in it would be as easy as a beaver slipping into its stick house. He waited the rest of that day, standing next to a giant oak that gave him clear view of the mound, but some cover as well.

If she came again, he'd prefer to see her before she spotted him.

Darkness drove him back to Freddie's, who had thankfully gone out. Next morning, he beat her and the cock up. Wouldn't do, Lacey coming early, and him missing her again. Mid-afternoon, a female about her size and shape descended from a hired carriage and walked toward the grave.

It was her. Her face as young and innocent as ever, but with a new knowing, took his breath away.

It came back hard. He filled his lungs easy and slow, willed his heart to stop thumping so wildly in his chest.

Wanting to see exactly what she did, hear what she said, he waited until she reached the grave and knelt beside it before easing toward her, careful of where he put each foot, never taking his eyes off Lacey Rose.



For the longest, she stared at the mound of dirt. A tear slipped out and trailed down her cheek. “Got to wait a year, but your grave marker is paid for and will be installed.” She chuckled, and gazed up to the sky.

She closed her eyes and lowered her chin. “You’re going to have a son, Harold. When he’s bigger, I’ll bring him to visit you. I’m not sure what all I’ll tell him...about you. For certain nothing about our first night together, but a man needs to know about his father, the good and the bad.”

Folding a leg under, she sat on the ground. “The house is finally in my name now. And I got a lot of the money you meant for me to have. Had to get a lawyer here and one in Glenn Falls, too. Of course the blood suckers took their pound of flesh.”

A shadow fell, her heart pounded and her mouth went dry. Not in a good position to protect herself, she frantically tried to figure what to do. She turned. “What!” Her heart took to beating like a caged cat. Could it be?

“Charley? Is it you?”

He extended his hand. “Yes, Lacey Rose. I’ve come to take you home.”

She took it and let him pull her up. “But how...how did you find me? Wind up here? I thought... Did you quit the army?”

“No. Wallace Rusk got shot in the leg then wouldn’t let them have it no matter what they said. Uncle Henry asked me to take him home, but Aunt Rebecca, and Mama, and Aunt May all together couldn’t get him to agree, either. He’s dead, Lacey. I’m sorry.”

Of their own, her eyes clenched shut. Like they could no longer bear the light of day or to see what Charley was saying. Her heart stopped. Not Uncle Wallace, not the daddy of her heart. The flood of tears forced them open.

“Oh no, Charley. It can’t be true.” Her knees buckled beneath her and she started down, but he grabbed her and pulled her in tight, holding her upright. She breathed him in and almost fainted for his smell, his touch.

Nothing had changed. Why had she ever thought it would? His arms felt wonderful around her.

But sorrow overwhelmed any joy his embrace brought.

For too long, she cried on his shoulder. She wanted to fall on the

ground and pound her fists into the dirt until the horrible truth reformed itself or Uncle came back. But that could never happen.

Just the other morning, she'd read in the Bible where King David said, he could go to his baby, but he couldn't come to him. It was the same with Uncle.

At some point, she indeed would go to Heaven and see him again.

That last day she'd hugged him, he held her tight and whispered in her ear that he loved her like a daughter, told her to be a good girl.

Then she'd gone and kissed Charley. In front of God and everyone. In front of Uncle.

Her deed rolled shame over her. She'd failed him. Then worse, run away, and...and....

Sobs anew beset her, and she melted into Charley.

Stroking her hair, he sighed. "I'm so sorry. I loved him, too." His voice cracked and he cleared his throat. "When he found out about the ransom note, as my commanding officer, he ordered me to come get you and bring you home."

What had he said? A ransom note? She leaned back. "What ransom note?"

"From a guy called himself the King of Diamonds. He sent it to Aunt May, wanted five thousand gold for you. I caught up with him in St Louis. He claimed you and him were partners before he loaned you to Longstreet. You were supposed to be back that day. Said Longstreet had promised. But he hadn't showed."

She pushed away from him.

A fire erupted in her belly, burned away her grief and worse, her joy at seeing Charley. She'd kill Jack! Shoot the rake dead and feed him to the hogs. "St. Louis, you say?"

He nodded then snorted. Or was it a snicker? His lips thinned before tightening into a grimace as though he could read her mind. Could he still know her so well?

"Cad!" She hit his arm just like she had a hundred times in the past. "Are you laughing at me?"

His head started down toward a nod, but he obviously thought better of it and circled, then sawed back and forth like a lumberjack slicing through a pine. "No. Well, it's..." He gasped once, then cackled.

At first, she wanted to slug him for real then caught some of his mirth. She smiled at him just before the audacity of it caught hold. He was laughing at her! Nothing made her have to put up with the likes of him anymore. She was grown, a wealthy woman.

Why he would choose to ridicule her after so long a time....

"Good to see you, Charley." She turned and marched toward the street.

Oh, no! Where had her carriage gotten off to?

In no time, he caught up with her. "Don't walk away from me, Lacey Langley. I've come too far, and I'm sorry. But it reminded me of that time we all went fishing, and Houston and Bart put those worms down the back of your dress. Do you remember?"

"Of course, I do. The little scalawags!" She stopped and faced him. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Oh, you getting mad at that Diamond guy, and your I-am-going-to-murder-him expression... I broke one of his fingers by the way."

"Just one?"

"I started working on another, but he told me what I wanted to know."

"You should have killed him, the sorry, no good loafer...." Her heart nicked her. 'Vengeance is mine, says the Lord' echoed through her soul. "I hope God gets him good, I mean does bad things to him."

YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW DAUGHTER

Maybe she should try to be more merciful and toss a little grace in Spade's direction.

How could she though? He was such a horrible rogue. Still...her heart knew the voice of the Lord and came under conviction to forgive Jack. Not an easy thing to do.

The one time love of her life's voice brought her from her internal debate. "No, if I'd of killed him, then I'd be hanged."

Why did he have to be right all time? She slow-punched his arm. "You're probably right, and it is good to see you. So very good, Charley. You're a sight for sore eyes for sure and for certain, but I can't go back to Texas. Not now."

"Why not?"

"I have my reasons." She shrugged. Not only did he have no need to know what they were, he had no right to ask. Her own person, she'd go to her home in Glenn Falls and figure out exactly when she wanted to return to Texas, on her own terms—if ever.

"But I love you, Lacey."

"Is that so?" She spun toward him, glaring. "You say it as though it should mean something. Aren't kin supposed to love each other? Yes, they are. So, I guess I love you, too."

When he didn't respond, she marched toward the street again, zigzagging, careful not the step on any graves.

"We're not kin."

She stopped but didn't look around. "That isn't what your letter said."

Suddenly, he stood in front of her. "I was wrong. I'd just killed two Blue Coats, and Uncle Henry made me a sergeant, because ours went and got himself killed in the same battle. I didn't want you

sitting home on needles, pining over me. But that's exactly all I've been doing since I sent that stupid letter. Pining over you."

"You were?"

"They didn't tell me you'd run off." He took off his hat. "I didn't expect you to write me again, but after a few mail calls with Bart and Houston getting no letters from you, I knew something had gone wrong."

"I...I...."

"I've been sick over you, girl. I love you. Not in a kinship way, either." He knelt on one knee before her. "You've got to forgive me, Lacey Rose."

"Why? Why should I? You're so mean, Charley Nightingale, and you shattered my heart! Give me one good reason why I should forgive you."

"I want to marry you."

She resisted smiling, but her heart thundered in her chest. He needed to know—right that second—but could she tell him? She had to. "I can't, and you won't want to. I'm..." Tears returned and overflowed.

Oh, Lord, give me strength.

Chapter Twenty-six

Lacey wiped her cheeks then somehow found her voice. "Get up. There's something I need to tell you."

Why had it all happened like that?

She studied the oak tree on the far side of the cemetery. Then she glanced down. The stubborn oaf remained on one knee, looking every bit a boy—the one who'd stolen her heart all those years ago.

His silly grin got even bigger. "No. Not until you say yes."

Exactly like him. He always wanted to be the boss. Telling her and Houston and Bart how the cow ate the cabbage. Always had to have everything his way.

Well, she'd just tell him. Get it over with. He'd react just like Nate then be on his way, and she'd never see him again. "I'm pregnant."

Why'd she blurt it out like that?

"Hopefully, I'll be as good a father to the baby as Levi Baylor was to me and Bart."

"That was different."

Scooting closer, he grabbed her hand. "No, no difference. Not really. I love you, Lacey Rose. I wasn't sure of it after all this time, until I saw you step out of that carriage. The boys thought I knew you were sweet on me, but I was blind to it. I swear. Then when you kissed me that day...I almost didn't go, started to come back. But...."

She should let him go on back to Texas, but she couldn't stand it another heartbeat. "Yes, Charley, I'll marry you."

Now she'd gone and done it.

He jumped to his feet and gave her hand a little tug. She threw her arms around his neck and tilted her head. He pressed his lips to hers. Way before she was ready, he leaned back. "We need to go."

"Where."

He kissed her again then grinned. "I'll tell you on the way."

Seemed foolish barging right into some strange lady's fancy house, even if she was Aunt May's editor, but Charley claimed it would be fine.

What kind of name was Freddie for a grown woman anyway? The cook seemed nice enough, but her boss probably would take one look and order her out. No half-breeds allowed.

Two hours and twenty-two minutes later, the home's owner proved her all wrong. Frederica acted like kin. Seemed for true that she couldn't be happier to meet Charley's Lacey and find out he'd asked her to marry him.

Kisses and hugs again, as if the woman was an aunt or something. But then she asked a question for which Lacey had no answer.

“When?”

Charley shrugged then smiled at her. “Getting late tonight. How about tomorrow?”

Same person she’d fallen in love with so many years before made her smile. That Nightingale never let any grass grow under his feet, but she didn’t want to wait either. “Tonight sounds all the better.”

Though she said it in jest, her love and the marvelous Frederica made it happen, complete with a fancy gown even.

While she tried on her loaned wedding dress, Charley ran a note two doors down. Of course, the senior bishop at Saint Michaels would be glad to assist. Per her betrothed, his exact words were ‘Yes, yes, I have nothing more important to do than officiate a wedding this evening.’

The simple ceremony didn’t match up at all to the one Lacey had dreamed of, but once all was said and done, she wore a golden band on her finger, a sign to the world that she’d married the love of her life and become Mis’ess Charles Nathaniel Nightingale.

The prize she’d fantasized about since she could remember.

After the ‘I dos’ and more hugs, cheers, and tears—even Aunt May’s editor cried—it finally came the time to be alone! Just her and him, mister and mis’ess. “Oh, Charley, I can hardly believe it. I feel like such a princess.”

“I have a surprise fit for royalty.” He lifted his bag to the bed and removed an old bottle without any kind of markings. He uncorked it then produced two crystal tumblers and filled both half full, extending one to her. “Here.”

“What is it?”

“Very old and highly prized, bourbon.” He touched his glass to hers then took a sip.

Touching it to her lips—she hated telling him she didn’t much care for hard liquor—then.... “Wow. That is so smooth, I’ve never tasted anything like it. Where’d you get it?”

As he drained his glass...was that a flash of concern etching his eyes? But no, then it was gone. “Fun story.” He leaned toward her and nuzzled her neck. “Want to hear it now or later?”

Choosing later, she forgot all about the fun story, lost amidst the joy of his loving her so completely.

Whatever came before or might come in the future, she loved her life. In that moment, that Comanche blood ran through her veins and her mother calling her a half-breed didn’t matter.

Charley’s heartbreaking letter either.

Jack, Harold, lying, cheating—none of it.

The bed shifted slightly. Her skin on one side abruptly chilled. One eye popped open. He lay on his side grinning. "Good morning, Mis'ess Nightingale."

"Yes, indeed, Mister Nightingale. I'd say it's a fabulous day." She scooted closer, and he kissed her. "I need to check out of my hotel. Want to take me?"

"Love to."

"Then we need to get to Glenn Falls and collect my things there before we go home."

"My wish is your command." He smiled.

Bursting out laughing, she poked his chest. "You're so bad. You said that wrong you know."

"What? What'd I say?"

"That your wish..." She couldn't quit giggling. "Was my command."

He laughed along. "Did I? Sorry. You knew what I meant though, right? So where's your hotel?"

"Uptown. Shouldn't take long."

"Not a problem. But if my wish does happen to be your command...he pulled her close and smothered her in kisses.

Even though she'd told him, it obviously didn't register. Not until the carriage stopped in front of the Astor. "You've been staying here?"

"Yes. I know...I booked it in a moment of weakness." What if she didn't tell him about Harold's claim of it only costing twenty percent more to go first class?

She'd answer any questions Charley had regarding her dead husband, but why borrow trouble volunteering?



A thousand questions vied on each breath, but he refused them all, not wanting to question her. The past would unfold in its own time...hers...and his.

How she'd come to afford such extravagance, staying in the Astor, really wasn't his business. Plenty of coin filled his money belt to get back to Texas. Once there again, he'd never want for anything.

And neither would she. He'd see to that.

Except, he would be honor bound to return to the war. While even the thought of having to kill or be killed hurt his heart, suffering disgrace especially in the eyes of his father and uncle—not to mention his boys—would never be acceptable.

Without honor, life had no luster.

"We don't have to check out until noon."

He focused.

Sitting on the edge of the fanciest bed he'd ever beheld, she bounced, grinning.

"Noon you say, Mis'ess Nightingale?"

"Yes, sir. And that bed you've been sleeping on..." She patted the covers.

Neither bed could compare to the one back home, but then he'd never been big on lying in his rack a minute extra. Get up and get to it. Whatever needed doing, he jumped up to get it done.

But that day, in the moment, lying next to her, sheer contentment filled him. Once he built Lacey a place of her own, he just might have to reconsider that old habit.

From the Astor to the train station took only a few minutes. The train pulled out a few minutes after one in the afternoon, only forty-two minutes behind schedule, according to the conductor.

She snuggled in tight and squeezed his arm. "We've got time now. Tell me the funny story."

Him and his big mouth.

"Diamond said you and Longstreet had planned on going to Albany, so I headed that direction. I noticed these two older ladies traveling by themselves because one was reading Aunt May's novel. Found out both were big fans, then told them my name." He smiled. "At first they thought I'd been named after the Charley in the book, but I told them it was the other way around."

"Oh, this is fun!"

"The oldest sister, Miss Claudia, took a bit of convincing, even grilled me about details in the book, but they finally figured the facts bore out I was who I said."

"Were they just beside themselves?"

"I suppose you could say that." He patted her hand. "They wouldn't hear of anything else, so I ended up staying with them. They'd inherited a distillery along with a brother from their father. When I left, Pauleen gave me the bottle as a gift for our wedding night."

"They knew of me?" Lacey scooted sideways on the hard bench.

"Of course. The baby girl born in Nacogdoches?" He grinned. "I told them all about you. They tried to help me track you down."

"So...if their father passed...the sisters were...older?" She glanced out the window. He followed her gaze. The scenery rushed by as the pulse through his veins became more apparent. He did his best to breathe normally, not enjoying her line of questioning. "What did Miss Pauleen look like?"

Him and his big mouth. "They were older, maybe in their forties." She faced him again, staring, waiting. "What'd she looked like? No one I've known I guess. Shoulder high, slim, salt and peppered dark

hair...what else?"

"Was she pretty?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Of course, I do. I mean she had to be smitten! She was, wasn't she? I mean forty or not, you're a very handsome man, Charley Nightingale."

"If you say so. I suppose, a little maybe."

"Did she love you?"

"I don't know, Lacey." He studied his boots." "Said she did."

"And do you love her?"

"No, not at all. I love you, sweetheart."

"Then why would you sleep with her? And why would she lie with you if she knew you loved me?"

Best get it out. "The first time, I'd drank too much of her special whiskey. Thought I was dreaming about you. The second –"

"It happened more than once?"

"Was the night before I left. She came to my room in the middle of the night. And well...I'd already... Plus, I was still mad at you, and...."

"Mad at me? What in the world for?"

"Running off, Lacey. Taking up with that Diamond guy."



Lacey glared. But how could she be angry or insulted? Full well, plain as a tick on a hound's nose, she'd earned no right to be upset with him, except that the very thought of him with another woman soured her stomach.

And...well...since he'd unburdened his soul....

"His real name is Jackson Spencer. The liar told me it was Jack Spade." She looked at Charley's boots and thought twice of telling him the whole truth. But if ever the time would be right... "The same day you left, my mother was so mad that I'd supposedly shamed her in front of everyone, she called me a half-breed. To my face."

"Oh, Lacey."

"Then I got your letter...I just...I had to get away. Ended up in Fort Smith washing dishes in a cheap saloon. Jack rescued me from the lurch I was working for."

"Why Fort Smith?"

"I'd heard about the Comanche trading there some. Hoped I could find some of Bear Fang's people and live with them, but Spade claimed he needed a partner and I'd fit the bill well. I was broke...and stupid. Didn't know until later he was a cheat."

He scooted close and rubbed her cheek with the backs of his

fingers. "I love you, Lacey Rose, and I'm so sorry I ever wrote that letter."

She faced him and put his arm over her shoulder then pressed in tight against his chest. She couldn't change the past, his or hers—just like she couldn't change what she was—except there with her true love, it didn't matter that the blood surging through her veins would always be half Comanche.

She scooted back around. "We don't have to go back to Texas. We could stay here. The war is almost over, and no one up here cares who I am."

"No. Texas is our home, and sweetheart, you're my wife now. That's all that matters."

She let him pull her back in tight...but no one had ever called him a half-breed.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The house itself proved to be something, nicer than he'd envisioned, and it resting in the shadow of the Adirondack Mountains surrounded by forest, caught Charley by surprise. "This is yours?"

She smiled then tossed her hair to one side. "Yes, well, ours now."

He liked her talking that way, but did he want anything that had belonged to Longstreet?

Once inside, the hired carriage gone, and introductions made, the caretakers insisted—and Charley hated telling old folks no—he found himself agreeing to stay for church the next morning then he'd head home on Monday.

What was an extra day?

That night in Longstreet's bedroom, sitting the man's chair and sipping Pauleen's whiskey out of his crystal tumbler while Lacey brushed her hair in front of his dressing mirror, Charley couldn't hold his tongue any longer. "Why'd you marry him?"

She didn't turn, but met his eyes in the glass then put the brush down. "I'd convinced myself I was in love with Jack, except I hated him...a lot, too. He'd just gotten his fingers broke, and we were short of cash.

"I thought he and I were both going with Harold, but at the last bell, the liar got off the steamship, and...." She hiked one shoulder then swung her legs around. "The thieving cheat must have planned it all along. To send Aunt May the ransom note while we were gone."

"Auntie said he came all the way to DeKalb before he posted the note."

"Idiot. Anyway, Harold had plans of his own I suppose. He brought me here and proposed. Said he figured he had another ten or twenty years at the most, then I'd be a rich widow."

She turned back around, picked up her brush, and went back to work on her hair. "Charley, I didn't think I'd ever see you again. Didn't know even if you were dead or alive, and...."

He gulped a big slug of bourbon. "And what?"

She shook her head, then looked at him in the glass again. "And I thought you and I were only kin, that's what. My heart would never have healed, you know. I've loved you since I can remember, even when I was a little girl...four or five. You were always my hero. Then...you were leaving...."

"I hate the war."

"You hate it? I loathe it, detest it. It's an abomination." She faced

him again, but kept brushing.

Her dark straight hair glistened almost blue in the lamplight. Nothing like Marah's...Marah! Where had that come from? He put the image of her away and focused on his beloved.

"So you left and I watched you ride off, gleaning the tiniest bit of happiness inside that at least you knew and would come home to me. Then my mother called me a half-breed, and I even endured that, knowing you'd come home to me. Then...I got... A part of me died, right then. I knew I'd never be whole."

Would he ever hear the last of that letter? He set his drink down and went to her.

"I can't change that I sent it, but I meant to set you free. Didn't want you pining. I know I was wrong now, but...I guess I was too dumb to know my own heart." He kissed the top of her head then her neck. "But I'm here now, and I'll never leave you again. I love you."

She spun around. "You won't go back to the war? You'll stay?"

"Whoa. No. I didn't mean that, Lacey. We're going home, and I will have to report back to my regiment. That's my duty, my honor, and has nothing to do with my love for you. I could never desert. Besides letting Uncle Henry down, I need to be there for Bart and Houston, watch their backs. Those boys need me."

"But I need you, too." The pain in her eyes shone so obvious.

"I know."

"I love you, and I'd give anything if it could be different."

"I know."

"Is there anything else you want to know about Harold?"

"No. He's dead and..." He smiled then pulled her up and into his arms. "I have you. I shouldn't have said anything."



Lacey relished his embrace. His arms were like no others. She should tell him the whole of it, but the words wouldn't come. She'd confessed her sins to the Lord, and they were under the blood.

Out of Charley's own mouth, he said he didn't need to know anything else. Why would he?

The pain in his eyes hurt her heart whenever Harold's or Jack's name came up.

He kissed her for real. He did love her. What else mattered? Nothing. Not anymore. She'd take her whoredom to her grave with her.

No need to hurt him any further. For sure and for certain, the baby would never know the means his father used to worm his way into her life.

Her son would never know anyone but Charley as his father.

And what a father he would make!

More kisses banished her past. Only loving her husband mattered.

The next morning, she woke with a smile. It pleased her that the Humphries had warmed so quickly to Charley, but who wouldn't love her husband?

And it thrilled her even more when he'd agreed to attend church in Glenn Falls before leaving. Hopefully, Nate would be there. She'd let him get a good look at a real man.

More than likely, he wouldn't be though. Probably off chasing smoke, trying to defeat President Lincoln.

But she sure didn't understand why since he heard same as her when Mister Dithers said Abe would be re-elected and that the war would end next April on the ninth. If only she could keep Charley home with her until then.

She rolled over, and he grinned.

"Good morning."

Smiling back, she scooted closer. "Do you ever sleep?"

"Some, but without a sentry, I keep one eye open."

"Have any idea what time it is?"

"Haven't heard a cock crow. Do the Humphries keep chickens?"

She nodded then scooped in tighter. "Guess we don't have to get up yet."

"Guess we don't."

The cock did crow, but by then, Charley had already made coffee and brought her a cup in bed as though she was some kind of princess.

After three tries, she found a dress that didn't bind her bulging belly too badly. She best locate a seamstress or buy some material. Sewing on the train would help pass the time, except the stinky things rocked and lurched so bad.

Might end up with nothing but bloody fingers and a mess.

A familiar soft tap sounded on her door, then Mother Humphries' gray noggin appeared. "Sweetheart, the men have the carriage ready."

"I'll be right there."

Mister Humphries reached the church grounds early as usual, but Lacey liked it. Meant she'd have more time to show off Charley before services. He helped Mother down first then came around to offer Lacey a hand.

The elderly couple walked arm in arm toward the building. They were so cute.

Then to her surprise, the pastor's wife marched out of the building's front door wearing an everyday dress and no bonnet. Her gray hair pinned rather haphazardly in a bun left stray strands bouncing as she hurried toward them.

After a brief consultation with both of the Humphries, she rushed away heading south.

The old man strode inside, his head bent as if studying the ground as he went. Mother Humphries came back to the carriage. "Pastor's sick. She wants the Mister to lead services."

"What's wrong, did she say?"

"Fever, and it's been high since yesterday. She's plenty worried. Says he's sweating so bad that he's soaked the bed."

Sounded as though it could be cholera to Lacey, but she didn't give her supposition voice. Miss Jewel had drummed into her about the fruit of your lips. "We'll pray for him."



Charley let Lacey show him off, but didn't try to remember any of the folks' names. They seemed nice enough, but he'd most likely never see them again. He regretted saying he'd come, wanted to get on about heading back to Texas.

On arrival though, honor required him to leave Lacey there and return to the war.

The thought tighten his innards. He hated the idea of having to sleep by himself again.

In just the few days, Lacey had become a part of him. He smiled remembering hearing the old folks talk about what they called the miracle of two becoming one. He didn't rightly believe in miracles, but if they needed to, fine by him.

The church's bell tolled, and with his wife on his arm, he followed the congregants inside. Just like so many other services he'd attended, announcements followed opening prayer.

While the old boy droned on, Charley let his mind wander, but it took him to Marah's horse farm. He tried to push her image away, but....

"Oh yes, my Charley can lead the singing. He has a beautiful voice."

"What?" Did Lacey just say he could lead the singing? He looked at her, but she faced the front, almost cracking her face in two with that smile he loved.

"How about it, Son? You willing to help me out here?"

Even from where he sat, Charley could see the 'beg' on Mister Humphries' face. "Yes, sir. Sure." He stood then glanced at his other half. "If my wife can help me."

A jab in his side let him know she didn't like being volunteered, but maybe it would serve her a lesson regarding offering up his services. The old man searched the crowd. Out of the corner of his

eye, Charley noted all the bobbing heads.

The old man nodded. "We'll allow it."

On the way up front, he searched his memory for something to sing. At first, he drew only a blank, then it hit him. He whispered in Lacey's ear and faced the congregation. "You folks know the song the children of Israel sang after they crossed the Red Sea?"

No one spoke up.

"I forget exactly where, but it's in the book of Exodus I think. Learned it back in Texas. Anyway, we'll sing it, and you folks join in when you get it."

The first time through, he sang it a little slower than normal, making sure to enunciate each word.

Second time around, most had caught the tune, then the third, he let loose. His feet threatened to carry him away, but he made them hold firm. He'd danced plenty of times, but only as a boy at the brush arbor in a midweek service.

And certainly, he'd never done such in a church building of a Sunday morning with all the stuffed-shirt folks in attendance.

The horse and rider song ran its course and right on its heels he started *Rejoice in the Lord Always*—Lacey led the women and they sang it in a round—then *Bless the Lord* from David's Psalms.

After that, he sang the *Lord's Prayer* real slow just like his mama loved, and his beautiful wife harmonized, sounding like an angel.

Squeezing her hand, he let the last note fade away. Toward the end, folks mostly had been singing with their eyes closed and heads bowed.

After a few heartbeats of silence, they looked up one by one. He didn't know what to do next. They just stared at him kind of sour looking, then finally some smiles broke loose.

At least they weren't throwing eggs or tomatoes. He gave the congregation a nod then tugged on Lacey's hand. She slipped her hand under his elbow then over his forearm and walked back to the pew in lockstep with him.



Lacey loved it, loved him, and loved how the folks reacted to her man.

Oh, she had chosen so right. Bless the Lord.

His mercy truly endured forever. She'd been able to pick out his voice singing in church before, but never had heard him cut loose as he had. The man was unbelievable, gifted to say the least.

Was there anything he couldn't do?

Her hero had come across the country, tracked her down, and

redeemed her life. Bless God that she'd seen Nate's true colors in time.

How horrible it would have been if she'd married the deacon just before Charley showed! God was so good, and she so undeserving of such mercy and grace. She could never thank Him enough.

"My, my. That was just wonderful, Charley and Lacey. Loved those songs. Thank you so much for stepping up."

Scooting into the pew, she nodded at Mister Humphries.

Looking much more relaxed, her caretaker scanned the crowd. "I've been praying about what I should say this morning. Only thing came was a verse in Revelation, one of my favorites. One I've been praying over this awful war. It says we defeat the devil by the Blood of the Lamb and the Word of our testimony." Twelfth chapter, eleventh verse.

Thumbing through his Bible as pages all over the sanctuary fanned. "And they overcame him by the Blood of the Lamb, and by the Word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death. Hmm, that last part sure speaks to so many of our young men dying on the battlefields today."

Pausing, he looked around the congregation. "Neighbors, we're all covered by the blood alright, but what of our testimonies?" He smiled. "Guess you ascertained where I'm going with this in light of our pastor being ill today. Anyone care to share theirs?"

For a few uncomfortable minutes—though probably in reality, only seconds—no one said anything. Lacey's heart pounded and her mouth dried. Hadn't she just been thinking of all God had done for her? But she couldn't go first.

Let someone else go first, please, Lord.

Finally, a man on the other side of the church stood.

"Come on up, Brother Earl, so everyone can hear."

"Uh, well, I just want to thank God for saving me. I was nineteen years old when He drew me. I walked down this very aisle and gave Him my heart, surrendered my life to His service." He shrugged. "Guess I don't do much, but the mis'ess and I took in the orphaned boys he sent us. And every week, I carry a portion of my garden to Widow Fairbanks. Uh, we've never wanted."

"Thank you, sir. That is indeed a true service to the Kingdom. Anyone else?"

Another man shared—Lacey's heart beating like a drum the whole time. God wanted her to speak. She knew it for sure and for certain, but could she?

Three more men and two women gave their testimonies, before another long period of uncomfortable silence ensued. The pounding got so hard and so loud, she stood.

Dear God. Now I have to go up there. Help me, Lord.

The muscle in her chest, surely pulverized, still beat against her ribcage as she turned at the pulpit and faced the crowd.

The whole time she'd been in Glen Falls, she'd never even been on the platform before, and there she was for the second time that Sunday morn. She took a deep breath and swallowed.

All over the sanctuary, expectant eyes seemed to urge her to speak, giving her their permission even though she was an outsider.

"As a rebellious teenager, I ran away from home and fell into many things I could never have imagined. I thought my life was ruined. But kept making bad choice after bad choice, believing I had no other options."

Tears blurred her vision. Helped some, not to see so clearly the people who so judged her for marrying such an old man—one they all knew was a card sharp.

"But we always have choices, don't we? I admit I married Harold Longstreet for all the wrong reasons. I didn't love him then, though I had come to respect him."

Words came hard. Her voice cracked, but she kept going. A glance at Charley, who nodded his approval, encouraged her. "Then after Harold was murdered—though I absolutely did not deserve it—God sent the love of my life to rescue me. He'd saved me a long time ago." She managed a chuckle.

"Charley and I accepted Christ and were baptized at the same camp meeting, but he told me the other day, he didn't know how crazy in love I was with him all my life." She filled her lungs then exhaled slowly. "So, my testimony is this: No matter how bad you mess up everything, the Lord will show His mercy, and He can fix it."

Feeling at least a hundred pounds lighter, she sat back down. Charley wrapped his arm around her and hugged her tight.

Too soon, the service was over. She'd hoped Charley would have shared, but then again, the folks there didn't know much of his life. Plus, she had cajoled him into leading the singing. Perhaps he figured he'd contributed enough already.


The Humphries appeared happier than she'd ever seen them. The Mister didn't even bother reining Buster to the other side of the road passing by Mister Dither's place.

Truth be known, she'd hoped the old man would have been at church, but...his presence would probably have intimidated everyone.

The feast Mother Humphries put on that evening surprised Lacey, but the precious lady claimed it was nothing special. Still, seemed she wanted to impress Charley, but then who didn't?

That night, her last in Glenn Falls for only the Lord knew how long, she woke way too early to the sound of a war drum.

Chapter Twenty-eight



Coming into a sleepy, semi-awareness, Lacey patted the bed. No Charley. She slipped out, grabbed her housecoat, and followed the sound of the drum beat to the great room.

Outside, a fire roared, sending sparks and embers skyward, her husband and too many to count young Comanche warriors danced around the blaze.

Ancient men sporting feathered bonnets beat on their drums. “What? How...?”

“Daughter, you have chosen wisely.”

She spun around. Mister Dithers warmed himself with his back to the suddenly flaming hearth. “Yes, I know. Charley’s wonderful.”

The old man nodded then stepped closer. “You two will live a hard life. Help him choose the sweet and reject the bitter.”

Though she hated hearing that, she knew down deep it was truth.

He smiled, glanced out the window, then faced her again. “You’ve heard him sing God’s praises like the nightingale. Encourage him to dance like King David danced, but remember to always give God the glory. The Lord is jealous of His glory, Daughter.”


Questions flooded her soul, but before she could ask even one, Mister Dithers vanished along with the fire. She spun around. Only Charley danced around the glowing embers, then he vanished, too. She rubbed her eyes and sat up.

A shaft of moonlight shone through her bedroom window and illuminated the sleeping lump next to her.

Only his steady breathing filled the silence. She eased back down, turned onto her side, and cuddled next to him. So warm. The night vision left a chill that had settled over her soul. His strength soon chased away the frost.

As sleep found her again, Mister Dithers’ words echoed through her conscious.

But what did it all mean?



Movement brought Charley to the nether. For a few fuzzy moments, the drumbeats lingered then rode the fire’s smoke as it lifted into the night sky and soared over the mountain.

The sound of a galloping horse turned his head to the right.

Marah, her hair flowing behind her, rode Lexi toward him.

Forcing his eyes to look again, closer, he focused on his beautiful lover, but he'd rejected her. His eyes opened to the dark, still room. He'd chosen Lacey Rose. She was his wife.

He lay still until Lacey's third little puffing snore he loved so much, eased out of bed, dressed, then kindled a fire in the cookstove two cock crows before Mother Humphries came in the back door.

"Good morning, Charley."

"Yes, ma'am. Sure is, but rather chilly for July."

"Not really, this far north, we're just as liable to need a fire as a fan."

After the weather got hashed out, and a big good-by breakfast eaten, then promises all around to write followed with a few tears from both Lacey and Mother Humphries.

The Mister—which both ladies called the man—arrived at the train depot with plenty of time to spare. They hadn't even got the engine's water hot.

First Class, seemed a bit rich for Charley's taste, but his wife insisted and had pressed the coin into his hand at the last second. Why not? Be nice to have a bed instead of sleeping with his head against the vibrating window.

A long whistle preceded the first lurch then the train chugged away from the station.

Lacey grinned at him. "Thank you."

From across the little enclosed room, sitting on the padded, upholstered bench, he winked. "Sure, pretty lady. What for?"

"Letting me pay the difference...so we could go first class."

Since he'd told her he had enough of Aunt May's gold to get them back to Texas, she must not have wanted that money to go for the difference. But he hadn't mentioned Freddie giving him the five hundred dollars.

The less said about her, the better. For sure, he didn't want any questions about how he'd spent his time in New York.

The train reached a goodly speed. Charley figured perhaps twenty miles an hour, breakneck if you ask him, but he'd heard about some going twice, even three times that fast.

Man wasn't meant to be hurled around in that manner in his estimation.

"Oh, I didn't tell you, I had the wildest dream last night."

He didn't much care for hearing folks' dreams, but it was Lacey and he'd missed her so long. Besides, he loved the sound of her voice, loved looking at her beautiful face. "I'm listening."

She grinned. "You were dancing around a big fire with what seemed like the whole Comanche Nation. Three old chiefs beat a

steady rhythm on three drums.”

“Hold it.” A chill started in his heart and swept through him, bringing his guard hairs to attention. “How old was I?”

“Same as now.”

He snorted, then another wave of chills. “I’ve dreamed about that same night so many times, but I was four when it actually happened. A moon or so before Bold Eagle traded mama and me to Levi. Most times, they didn’t let us boys do anything but watch.

That night my father grabbed me up and held me in his arms as he danced. I squirmed loose and danced right there in the middle of them.”

“That’s too strange. You’re saying what I dreamed really happened?”

“I am.” He bit his lip, reliving that night once again then looked at his wife. “What’s even weirder is that I dreamed about it, too. Last night.”

“You didn’t! There was more in mine. Mister Dithers came.”

“Who?”

For the next few miles, she told him about the old man. How his appearance hadn’t changed in the last forty years.

She shared about the time he came to church, what he said, and that the preacher ended up dying in his hide-away-woman’s arms because he wouldn’t repent.

And, she relayed when the guy came to the Copperhead meeting there in Glen Falls and predicted Lincoln would win the election and that Bobby Lee would surrender to Grant next April 9th at the Appomattox Court house.

“He told me something about you.” She shrugged then fell silent.

“What was it?”

She scrunched her eyes shut, then bobbed her head up and down. She finally looked up. I should have written it down. “He told me, ‘You’ve heard him sing God’s praises like the nightingale. Encourage him to dance like King David danced...’ Then he said something else I can’t recall...it’s on the closest edge.”

“You don’t remem –”

“I know! He said, ‘But remember to always give God the glory. He’s jealous of His glory, Daughter.’ That’s it. That was all he said. Did he tell you that, too? Was there a strange wild-haired old man in your dream?”

Her words washed over and through him. “Tell me again what this old guy looked like.”

She described him in more detail.

Glory bumps rose on his legs and arms as she spoke. It was him. It had to be. But it couldn’t be. There was no way it could.

“You were just a baby, barely a week old, if that. Our mothers and Wallace went one night to this church service. The very same old man you described...he was there, beating on a drum.

“I ended up dancing that night. The more I leapt and whirled and twirled, the bigger the old man grinned. Mama was leery of him when he asked if he could bless me, but I told her I wanted him to because he liked how I danced.

“I remember calling him a medicine man—you know, a spiritual leader. The strangest thing of all, Lacey...he spoke the exact same thing over me that night that you’re saying Dithers told you in your dream.”

“Oh, Charley. It has to be a Word from God.”

“Well, except that night, the old man told me I’d have a hard life.”

She scooted out and put her hands on his knees. “Charley! That was the first part. I’d forgotten the first part until you just said that. Before that other, he said, ‘You two will live a hard life. Help him choose the sweet and reject the bitter.’ What does it mean?”

“I don’t know.” He stared off as though thinking about it. “Levi told me that he also dreamed about the old man—the night before he got saved.”

“Could it possibly be the same man? It couldn’t, could it?”

“Not a man. Wallace and I think he’s an angel.”



The mention of Wallace’s name brought internal battles within Lacey, and she hated Charley bringing it up. She still hadn’t reconciled his death, preferring to think he was still home, alive, that somehow, he survived...or something.

He couldn’t be gone, and the last time she saw him was that day they rode off for war.

Perhaps once she arrived home and saw his grave...then maybe, it would become real.

But after all, her husband had left before he died. God could do all things, work miracles. She focused on him. “That would explain it. What does Uncle Levi think about him? Did he say?”

“Only that he’s not sure. You’ve heard about the note, right?”

“Yes, that came from Dithers or whatever his name is?”

He nodded. “It saved us that night.”

Before she could say more, a knock silenced her.

“Yes?” Charley jumped to the door, one hand on the lock, the other at his hip, ready to draw his knife.

“Conductor, tickets please.”

He twisted the little knob, stepped back and opened the door.

Lacey handed over the pasteboard pieces. The man punched them, tipped his hat, then walked on down the hall.

“Lock the door, please.”

He did as told and turned around, grinning. “You’ve never been a scaredy cat. What happened?”

She stood and went to working on her buttons. “Still not. Just wanted to show you another reason I wanted to go first class.”

He moved to her. “Here, let me help you.”

That night after countless turns of the train’s iron wheels over the iron rails, Lacey fell into a deep sleep. As though she soared on eagle wings, she flew back to the house in Glenn Falls.

Once there, she strolled into the great room. Mister Dithers warmed his backside by the hearth’s blazing fire.

“Tell him. Daughter. The Lord has forgiven you. So will Charley.”

“No. I can’t.” Why had she come? Her head hung low. She couldn’t meet the old man’s eyes. “He’ll...he’ll...hate me.” She collapsed into a heap of worthlessness and wept.

The old man vanished without another word.

Coming to semi-consciousness, she rolled over and snuggled in next to her husband. For twenty winks, she wrestled with herself, then resolved to tell him in the morning. She had to be obedient to God inside her, and His conviction grew stronger by the wink.

As always, he woke first and had her a steaming cup of coffee at the ready. He put the bed away and turned the little room back into the comfortable double seats.

While she dressed, she practiced the words she’d use, but kept changing them. Couldn’t find the right ones. How did a woman tell her husband she’d allowed her ex-lover to whore her out?

Breakfast was served in the first class dining car, then he followed her back to the little private room.

But each time she opened her mouth to tell him, her tongue got tangled around her eye teeth and she couldn’t see her way. She grinned just thinking of one of Uncle Wallace’s favorite sayings.

Nothing was funny about what she had to say.

Her dearest must have sensed something bothered her, but when he asked, instead of blurting it out, she put on her no-no-nothing-is-wrong face and lied. That made it all the worse. How could she lie to her love? Her soulmate?

That evening the train reached Buffalo, and she hadn’t found the words yet.

Again he let her pay the difference between steerage and first class on the steam ship, except this time, she gave him the money ahead of time. What she should do is give it all to him, but she couldn’t bring herself to offer.

It puzzled her a little that he hadn't asked for it, or at least been curious about how much money they had now.

Surely he had to care. After all, it was his, too.

The two hundred and seventy miles from Buffalo to Detroit took two days and one night, but still the right time or exact words to tell him of her whoredom couldn't be found.

He never seemed so happy and carefree, and she couldn't ruin it, not then. And praise the Lord, Dithers hadn't returned to her dreams.

Did Charley really need to know? He hadn't told her much about his life. She'd sort of tricked him about that old whiskey lady. Lacey suspected he'd been with her...then when she acted like she knew, he fessed up.

As he settled them in their new train's first class cabin on their way from Detroit to Grand Rapids, she decided if he said anything about Jack or Harold she'd tell him then.

On the way to the docks at the city of Holland to catch another Great Lakes Steamer, the muscles in her neck finally relaxed.

That'd be her cue, a good decision—nothing to rehearse or the exact words to find. She'd just blurt it out at his first question. And if he never did....

The evening of the thirty-first day of July found them docked half a mile from Chicago's harbor. The city lights glistened on the lake's still waters, but as she and her husband stood on the third floor railing looking at the sight, a dread fell over her soul.


He squeezed her hand. "Come on. Let's get supper."

She didn't want to eat. She wanted off that boat, to run.

But where? And what from? What shadowed her soul?

Somehow she managed a smile and a calm voice. "How about a drink before we eat?"

Chapter Twenty-nine



Jack held the glass up. It looked clean enough, so he set it atop the stack, just as the little weasel slipped under the double doors and glanced around the near empty room.

He hurried to the bar right across from Jack. “It’s them alright. I seen ’em clear as day.”

Turning away from the sneak, he poured a jigger full in appreciation—or partial payment. Great. Instead of only the tramp’s reflection in the mirror, the bum smiled a semi-toothless grin.

Placing the whiskey in front of the man, Jack held his breath against the guy’s stench. “You’ve said that before. You sure this time?”

“Yes, sir. I seen ’em last night standing on the rail of the top floor. Lovebirds they is. I hitched a ride with the pilot, and sure as soapsuds, it’s her. Just like you said.” The guy snickered. “That Texan is staying in the same cabin as your wife.”


“Shut up. When do they dock?”

“Any minute.” He gulped the liquor in one toss. “But it’ll be another hour or better a’fore they offload.”

“You sure it’s her?”

“Yes, sir.” The man stood tall. “I’ll take that fiver you offered now.”

Jack pulled a Half Eagle from his vest pocket and held it in front of the man. “Help me get her away from the Texan, and you can have its brother.”



For the last few days, Charley had sensed something was wrong with his wife, but after what happened when he quizzed her that one time, decided to let it lay.

Whatever it might be, she’d tell him in her good time. He found he truly enjoyed traveling first class, though he ought to make her save the money—put it away for the baby—but the little one surely benefited its mother having an easier time of it, too.

As he walked the gangplank, a foreboding settled over his heart. If back in San Antonio, he’d bet hard money a regiment of Bluecoats or a Comanche raiding party hid just over the first hill. But in Chicago, no one even knew his name.

Still, he’d always follow his pa’s and Uncle Wallace’s advice to trust his instincts.

Stepping onto the dock, after only a few steps, he squeezed Lacey's hand. "Something's afoot."

"What?" She snuggled in tight. "Did you see something?"

"No, just feel it." He did a slow look over the crowd of folks, some coming, most going. Beyond them, a row of warehouses rose in front of the drab skyline. Stevedores and gangs of freedmen worked toting goods in and out.

Nothing or anyone appeared to show any interest in him or his wife.

Locating where the porter had stacked their bags, he gave her a grin. "Guess I'm being an old maid. Nothing appears out of order."

"Never." She giggled. "Come on. Let's find a hack."

He hefted the bags and headed toward the first cross street. Halfway there, a blur to his left drew his attention. He dropped the bags and turned toward the threat. A knife-wielding man rushed toward him. Charley stepped forward, threw up his left arm, and reached for his own blade.

The attacker raised his hand. The Arkansas toothpick flashed as the man plunged it down on Charley's arm. He pulled his knife up and stabbed the guy in the belly, but withdrew it without twisting.

The guy stumbled back, grabbed his mid-section, then took off up the street. Charley turned. Spade had an arm around Lacey's throat with a Derringer pointed right at him.

He stepped closer. "Let her go, Jack."

"You owe me. Both of you do. I want my money."

Charley shook his head. "No. We don't. Let her go now, and I'll not kill you."

His lady opened her mouth slightly and exposed her teeth with a question in her eyes. He nodded. She bit down on Spade's arm, and Charley sprang at him. A shot rang out. He grabbed the gun and screwed the intruder's hand skyward.

The guy howled as Lacey's teeth tore at his forearm.

Grabbing the man's hand, he squeezed and twisted it. Spade dropped the gun, but Charley hung on, kept turning. "Let go, Lacey. Move aside."

In obedience, she released his arm then hurried away. "Don't kill him, Charley. He's not worth it."

As much as he wanted to, she was right. He released his grip then drove his fist square into the man's nose. Spade stumbled back then righted himself.

For a heartbeat, it appeared the idiot wanted to fight. But as the ring of gawkers grew, he backed up and spit. "You can have her. She wasn't that good anyway."

Charley brought his knife up, but didn't flip it over. He couldn't

kill a man backing away, no matter how despicable he might be. A shrill whistle sounded, and a constable came through the crowd.

The bystanders shouted and pointed toward Jack who took to running off in earnest and the lawman followed.

“Oh, baby! Your arm! Let me see it.”

Blood soaked his cuff and dripped from his fingers. He sheathed his blade then let her have his arm.

“Oh, no. You’re cut bad. We’ve got to find a doctor!” She turned toward the crowd and screamed as though he was about to bleed to death. “A doctor! Where’s the nearest doctor?”



Lacey kept her senses all the way to the doctor, even helped the nurse get Charley cleaned up some, but when the man got out his needle and catgut, her stomach went to rolling, and her head swam.

A million tiny golden sparkles glistened all around. Small soft hands took ahold of both her shoulders.

“Honey, you look a little green. Maybe you should sit down.”

Glancing to the left from whence the kind voice spoke, she caught a glimpse of the assistant just as the backs of her calves touched the chair the woman had guided her. She sat.

In her peripheral vision, she couldn’t help but follow the doc’s hand go high in the air, pulling the catgut through Charley’s flesh. Her hands covered her eyes.

It was all her fault, she was to blame. That fool man with Jack could have cut her dearest’s arm off. She hated even seeing that toady scoundrel again. Should’ve got her pistol; out and shot him dead right there.

No. That wouldn’t please God. Or Charley.

How could she have ever thought she loved the man? He’d surely aged three or four times more than the months it’d been since last she saw him. Living evil. That’s what it did for a person—made him appear way older.

The thought struck her that maybe Charley thought that of her. Had she aged, too? He hadn’t changed one iota.

What a marvel that he defended her and himself victoriously against the two ruffians. Outnumbered and outgunned, he’d saved her anyway...again. Was there anything her man couldn’t do?

“Babe?”

She looked up. Yes, darling?”

“In my bag, there’s a flask. Fetch it for me, please.”

The bags! Where were they? Oh yes. She vaguely remembered thanking a good Samaritan who’d put them in the hack. She faced the

nurse. "Do you happen to know where the driver put our bags?"

"Yes, dear. They're in the front office."

The doctor still worked on sewing flesh when she returned with the hand-sized fancy silver flask. She looked it over good then unscrewed the cap and handed it to Charley. He took a good slug.

"Thanks, sweetness. You about through, doc?"

"No, that thief cut you to the bone. It's going to take awhile."

Charley tipped the flask again then held it up and let the last few drops drip onto his tongue before he handed it back. "Is there a saloon nearby?"

"Not far, but I sell laudanum. Harriett, get him a pint."

"Make it two."

It did take a good while for the doctor to finish with his sutures, but after half a pint of the opiate, Charley didn't seem to care much.

If it hadn't been for the wound, she found him slurring his words quite humorous, but instead, her heart filled with gratitude for the pain killer. That no-count cad better hope she never saw his face again.

Owe him, indeed.

From the doctor's office, she took him to the second best hotel in town, registered for a first floor room, and had him in bed straightaway.

Once he fell asleep—or passed out from the last slug of laudanum—she retreated to the water closet. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she turned the hot water's stopcock.

While the tub filled, she stripped off her clothes then dunked herself all the way under.

Jack's stink lingered, but worse were the disgusting words he'd whispered in her ear. They still rang in her mind, sickening her. The cad gloated while Charley fought for his life.

Bless the Lord. At least she'd not gotten him killed... like poor Harold.

No matter how much she didn't want to tell Charley the truth, she had to. Just as soon as he healed up. She could absolutely not leave it for Jack to reveal one day for the sheer meanness of it.

No. She'd never let him hurt Charley that way.

The tub's water cooled to tepid, but the hotel's fancy soap couldn't scrub off what had happened; Jack pressing himself against her and whispering what she was in her ear lingered. She hated him.

A part of her regretted telling Charley not to kill him. It would have been self-defense with plenty of witnesses.

Like Uncle Henry said, only took one to hang a jury.

But the bigger part of her heart gave God thanks that he didn't.

A guttural moan pulled her out of the water. She grabbed a towel

and hurried to the bed. Charley sat up, his eyes closed with both his hands out. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

What in the world? She nudged him back down, then slipped into bed beside him and wrapped an arm around his chest.

Poor baby. She loved him so much. Had forever, and yet she'd caused him so much pain and suffering.

With the worst yet to come.



His wife's warmth coaxed Charley to the nether, but Charging Elk remained in the shadows, an ever present danger, slipping in and through Charley's night vision so that he'd have to kill him again on another night.

Of all his brothers, why had he been the one? The question brought him full awake.

Though the pain in his forearm had dulled some, it still barked if touched or jostled. Should have trusted his gut. But how would that have changed anything? What good would it have done, except maybe he'd have been more alert, at the ready.

He snuggled in tighter then blew on her neck. She scrunched down into her pillow. He blew a little harder.

"You awake?"

"How could I not be when there's such a beautiful lady in my bed?"

She rolled over. "Did I wake you up?"

"Yes, but I'm glad. I needed waking."

"Why?"

He had to tell her. Should be no secrets between a husband and wife, not if they were going to be truly one. As his beloved, she should know everything about him. "I was dreaming about Charging Elk."

"Who?"

"The Comanche I killed when I was ten."

She raised and propped her head on the heel of her palm. "You knew him?"

"I did and I loved him. He was my brother."

"Oh, Charley! How awful."

"Indeed. He took up for me, the only one who did. The oldest son of Bold Eagle's second wife, he kept the others from taunting me. First Father called me Sky Eyes, but I fought the little brothers who called me Weak Eyes. Charging Elk took care of the older ones."

"Why'd they call you weak eyes? There's nothing weak about you."

"I cried some back then. They never did. No matter what

happened.”

“Oh, mercy! What four-year-old doesn’t?” She turned a bit more sideways and snuggled in even tighter.

Since she didn’t ask more, he saw no need to tell her the worst of it. Not now. He stroked her hair, but his own words condemned him. He needed to tell her about Marah, but how could he?

Knowing he’d been with Pauleen had wounded her so. Then like a crazy man, he had her get the flask she’d given him.

Her inspection had not gone unnoticed. What should he do with the thing? He couldn’t send it back, that would hurt Pauleen. Especially after she and Claudia had been so nice. Should he throw it away? Sell it?

It would always remind him of the older lady, his first... He may just keep it if Lacey never adamantly objected.

If he told her about Freddie’s daughter...

She’d asked if he loved Pauleen, and he could truthfully tell her no. She’d surely ask the same about the publisher’s daughter, and he wouldn’t lie to her. Best keep Marah to himself, at least a little longer.

What was that old saying? What she didn’t know couldn’t hurt her. He’d chosen Lacey. That was what mattered.

Not some lady in Danbury Connecticut who still held a piece of his heart.

Chapter Thirty

Lacey ran out of words. Hard to argue with a man who spoke the truth. His arm would hurt no matter if lying in bed at the hotel or riding on a train.

So, at his request, she packed the bags and checked out. Both on the way to the station and once there waiting to board, she constantly searched the crowd.

Twice, she thought she spotted Jack, but it turned out to be only men who favored him. She relaxed some once they boarded and got into the private cabin.

As the train chugged away from Chicago, finally free of constant worry over another attack, she took a good deep breath then thanked the Lord.

He'd not said a word about her paying for the first class tickets. The smart and right thing to do would be to go ahead and give him the cash still in her clutch. And she probably should tell him about the horde she'd left in the New York bank as well, but...

Well, with his left arm hurt, perhaps she ought to just hang onto it a while longer.

Not that with only one good arm, Charley couldn't best any thief.

Each jolt and jostle showed on her husband's face, but he never complained, not once. And he'd slowed way down on nipping the laudanum and whiskey. Each time he asked her to fetch his flask, the thought to ask him about it played across her mind.

It obviously cost more than Charley made in a month. No way would he have bought it.

Where did he get it? The thing had to have a story, but from that first time in the doctor's office, she thought she saw a bit of regret on his face for having her retrieve the thing from his bag.

So why didn't he just tell her? Probably a gift from that old whiskey lady. Maybe she should accidentally toss it out the window.

The evening of the second day, she figured he'd napped enough and tapped her shoe against his boot. "Sweetheart, want to go get supper? It's getting late."

He didn't answer.

She touched his good arm to give it a little shake. It was hot. She put the back of her hand against his forehead. Oh dear, even hotter. "Baby! Wake up. Let me look at your arm."

One eye opened a quarter. "What? Why?"

"You're burning up, darling. Are you feeling terrible? I'm so sorry."

I want to check your arm. Here, let me see it.”

With a wince, he lifted his left arm enough to get it out of the sling then held it out for her. Slowly she unwrapped the bandage then carefully pried off the bloody cotton gauze.

His skin all around the stitches glared an angry red, and swelling almost covered the stitches. She softly pressed next to an open area and a thick pus oozed out.

Her heart sank to her belly.

“It isn’t looking good, sweetheart.” She stood. “I’m going to find a doctor to take a look. I’ll be right back. You rest.”

Without any objections, he closed his eyes and leaned back in the corner.

It took longer than she hoped. Why didn’t Northwestern Railway have a doctor aboard on every trip? Unable to locate a doctor or drummer, hoping for yellowroot at the least, she settled for an onion and some honey from the cook’s kitchen.

Once back, she went to work. First, as easy as possible, she cleaned the wound with lye soap and water, careful not to pull on any of the catgut.

How was he staying so calm? She’d be howling like a pack of coyote pups wanting supper.

After a thorough cleaning, she daubed the cut with an onion wedge, squeezing gently, then slathered honey over and around the stitches. She cut and placed the remaining onion pieces around the cabin.

Their aroma she didn’t much care for, but Miss Jewel swore the roots soaked up the bad air when a body had a fever.

Sure couldn’t hurt.

Later that evening, after arriving in St. Louis, it seemed his fever had cooled some, but he remained hard to rouse and his skin still too warm to the touch for her liking. He didn’t protest at all when she hired help to get him to a hotel and into bed.

He’d planned instead to go straight to the docks, but she wasn’t going anywhere before a doctor looked at him.

The sun peeking in an eastern window woke her that next morning—Wednesday, the third day of August, 1864—to a soaked bed and feverish husband who wanted nothing but a sip of water and to be left alone. She hated running off but she had to find a doctor.

Or at least an apothecary that stocked yellowroot or comfrey.

The honey and onion certainly weren’t working.

Without benefit of coffee, she quickly dressed, counted her cash, double checked her Derringer, then hurried out.



Charley's horse slowed with each labored step. He looked under his arm. The band neared, but their mounts seemed fresh, not lathered at all. Why hadn't he stripped off the saddle?

Where was he anyway? He looked again. Comanche. Why were his brothers chasing him?

"Charley."

To his right, Marah angled toward him on Lexie. Her hair—how he loved it—flowed behind twice as long and thick as before.

The thoroughbred gobbled the prairie in monster strides. She came alongside, and he jumped onto the stallion's back behind her. The horse vanished, and then somehow he found himself chest deep in warm water.

In the bath house at her farm.

His brothers gone.

Her lips broke into a wide grin. "I'm so thrilled that you came back to me, Charley Nightingale."

"Marah. I can't stay. I've got to find Lacey."

"But you did find her! Don't you remember?" She reached out and touched his lips with her fingertips. She carries that gambler's child, while I carry yours."

Oh no. It couldn't be. He had to wake up.

Her words cut his heart. "Marah..." He sat up in bed and muttered, "Thank God." Easing out of bed, he made his way to the water closet. Only a dream. But could it be true? "Lacey?" Where could she be?

No answer came.

He glanced at himself in the mirror. Such a cad. The night vision could be true. Dear God though, what could he do if it were? His image vanished as he rolled over and snuggled into his wife. His arm screamed.

He opened his eyes. His bladder begged for relief. He sat up. Was he really awake that time?

"You're awake. How's your arm this morning, sweetheart?"

He twisted a bit to face her.

The concern in his wife's eyes obvious.

"Hurts." He stood. "But not too bad, seems maybe the swelling has gone down. The honey and onion worked." He moseyed toward the water closet for real. A wonder he didn't wet the bed. His dream seemed so real.



Though Lacey loved him with more than just her heart, her whole

being, right that minute, she wanted to hogtie him until he told her all about this Marah he'd been talking to all night.

He strolled back into the room. "Let's pack it up and find a steamer going south. This room has got to be costing a fortune."

She scooted to the headboard. "How about we give it one more day? You scared me, Charley. Besides, the doctor is going to be here in another hour or so."

He stopped at the edge of the bed. "I don't need a doctor. I'm fine."

"You weren't fine though for the last three days! I thought I might lose you, or that you might lose your arm to the infection! You about burned up with fever."

"What day is it?"

"It's Friday already. August fifth."

"No. Really? Are you sure?"

"Of course I am!" The harshness in her voice surprised even her. Poor Charley looked as though he didn't know what hit him. She threw the covers back, grabbed her housecoat, and headed to the water closet.

He stepped in front of her. "Lacey. What's wrong?"

She wrinkled her nose, gave him a little headshake, then pushed him to the side. "I need to get in there."

Upon her return he hadn't moved at all.

Just stood there. Concern etched his face. "Answer me now. What is the matter?"

"Nothing. You're healing, and I'm..." Tears welled. She couldn't just blurt it out, and she couldn't ask him about that Marah lady. He hadn't even known if Lacey was alive then. Probably some sporting lady in San Antonio or....

But now she knew of two. So what? She'd been with two men herself. How could she be upset with him?

"If nothing is wrong, why are you crying?" He held his arms out, but she didn't want him to touch her.

She shook her head. "Sit down. I need to change your bandage."

"Thought you said the doctor was coming."

"He is, but..." She turned her back on him. Hot, salty tears streamed down her cheeks. Her life was over. He loved another. Why hadn't her carrying Harold's baby bothered him more?

Probably because the marriage was all a sham to get her back to Texas. Him and his honor! He'd promised Wallace he'd bring her back—even if it meant marrying her. She tried to sidestep him.

He blocked her way. "Tell me what has you so upset. Please, baby. I love you."

"Do you?"

“Yes, I do. You know I do, don’t you? You’re my wife, and apparently, you’ve saved my life.” He held his bandaged arm out. “Can’t I thank you? Hold you? It’s clear something is not right.”

“It’s just me.” She wanted to kiss him—or slap him—or maybe jump out the window. She couldn’t rightly decide. “I hate you sometimes.”

“Oh my.” He nodded agreement, like he understood, but his eyes looked lost. He didn’t have a clue. But how could she accuse him, when she was every bit as guilty. She couldn’t, that’s what! He pulled her to himself. “What did I do?”

She closed her eyes. It was time. She had to tell him. But she couldn’t face her mother without him, and...once he knew... He was bound to leave her, want a divorce, or kill her.

That’s what she deserved. To be taken out and stoned. He wrapped one arm around her waist. She looked up into his confusion.

His eyes pleaded...for the truth.

“I’m a...” Tears overflowed again. How could she live without him?

“What? You’re a what, sweetheart?” He held her cheek against his chest. “I can tell you. You’re a beautiful, intelligent, wonderful woman with so much love and compassion in your heart, it blinds me. Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

Her throat tightened. Her breath came hard, and she just shook her head no against him. It would be easier if she didn’t have to look at his eyes. Her heart pounded. The truth choked her coming up from her belly.

Somehow she managed a raspy whisper. “I’m a whore.”

“What? No. You’re my precious wife.”

She shook her head again and went limp against him. “I...I...let Jack whore me out, Charley.”

His tears dripped on her cheeks. “Doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. It’s all in the past. You’re my wife now.” He wrapped his arms around her, and held her upright as she wept. It was out, and though her heart ached, relief swept through her that it was over.

He knew.

Now if only what he said was true.

But she had to know, and if there was ever a time, that had to be it. The image of him and his own soiled dove danced across her mind’s eye. “Husband, who is Marah?”



How could he not tell her? Charley filled his lungs then exhaled. His sins had found him out just like his partners always told him.

“Freddie’s daughter.”

She backed up a step and glared. “Where was she? Hiding in the attic? Afraid I see the truth if you trotted her out?”

Her tone surprised him. After what she just fessed up to.... “No. She hates New York and lives on the family farm in Connecticut. Raises thoroughbreds there.”

“What’s that?”

“Fancy horses. Jumpers. They hunt off of them and race them.”

“So how’d you get there?”

“By train. Freddie took me. She’d heard the Feds were going to have another round of drafts, so she asked the police commissioner to find you and Longstreet, and I went north to avoid conscription.”

His wife studied him, bore into him through her fresh tears. “Do you love her?”

“Some, maybe. But nothing like I love you.”

Though her tone softened a bit, her fists clinched. “How many were there? How many more?”

“None. Pauleen...she was the first, and I never intended to sleep with Marah, but....”

“Never intended? How do you not intend to do that? I don’t see how it can happen accidently. But what?”

Hiking one shoulder, he shook his head. How could she be giving him the third degree? “But you, Lacey. I wasn’t even sure I would ever see you again.”

For several heartbeats, she stared. Tears streamed down her cheeks. “So you love her some? How can you love her and me? At the same time?”

“I don’t know. But I chose you. From the moment you stepped out of that carriage, I knew I’d made the right choice. That you are the one I want. You’re the one I need. Not her.”


“Then why do you still love her?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know how a heart works. You two are so different. Maybe it was just lust. But I know this, you are the woman I want to grow old with. I want you to be the mother of my babies. Lacey, our pasts can’t be changed. Mine or yours.”

“I know.”

“What’s done is done, and now those people are gone, and we’ll probably never see any of them ever again. What matters is from this moment on.” He held his hands out. “I love you Lacey Rose. Do you love me?”

Chapter Thirty-one



Her feet threatened to bolt, carry her into his embrace, but Lacey didn't move.

"Yes, I love you. Of course I love you! I've loved you since forever, every day, and all day long. But you keep breaking my heart, Charley."

He halved the distance, his arms still open. "You've hurt me, too. But I never meant to cause you pain...and I don't believe you wanted to hurt me either. Fact is, we love each other. There'll be hard times to work through...for any couple. Can you forgive me?"

She ducked her eyes and studied the hoop rug he stood on. "There's one more thing you need to know."

"Tell me then."

She looked up. "I kissed Jed Briggs."

"Jasper's little brother?"

"Yes. He's not too little anymore."

His eyes flashed. "Why'd you kiss him?"

She scrunched both shoulders. "Well, I'd just run off. Spent two nights out then the third in Wallace's and Rebecca's barn. Uncle had boarded up the big house...."

"Yes, I know that. I helped him. What's that got to do with Jed?"

His tone surprised her. He seemed more upset over a silly kiss than her selling her favors. "I figured the family would all think I went west, so I headed east. He came along with a load of timber, heading to Phillips. I traded him a kiss for a ride...and more important, for him keeping his mouth shut. Except I told him he could tell Bobby Ray."

"That explains the note."

"How's that?"

"Someone left an unsigned note on the Donaho's front desk when no one was there, marked it for Uncle Chester. It said you were spotted in DeKalb."

She shrugged. "Little bugger claimed he could keep his mouth shut."

His eyes cooled. "One little kiss? Is that all it was?"

She wiped her mouth. "Well, at first I made him put his hand in his back pockets, but then...."

"Then what?"

"Well, I'd just got your letter, and Jed was being such a gentleman... I kissed him for real."

He stepped closer, his mouth stayed stern, but his eyes sparkled.

What was he thinking?

“Show me.”

“What did you say?”

He grinned. “Show me how you kissed the Briggs boy, then we’ll never mention it or anything else we’ve been talking about this morning.”

She caught some of his mirth. “Best put your hands in your pockets, Mister Nightingale, except that nightshirt you’re wearing doesn’t have any.”

With both hands on his hindquarters, he leaned in a bit. “I’ll just hold them behind my back.”

The kiss lasted longer than the one she’d given Jed. Way longer. Surprised her that his arm didn’t seem to pain him any at all.



Once the doctor finally arrived, he made a big spectacle of feeling Charley’s forehead and putting an ear to his chest, then quizzed his wife about the night as if he weren’t sitting right there in the room.

After poking the skin around his cut, the man pronounced him past the worst then held his hand out.

Even before he could ask what he owed, his wife put a silver dollar in the sawbones’s palm.

“Tell him we should wait another day before we leave.”

The doctor pocketed the coin then shrugged. “Stage? I can’t recommend leaving for a couple of days. Steamer? It would be fine to head on home this afternoon.”

Charley hustled to the door and opened it. “Thanks, Doc.”

Over Lacey’s lame protest, while she packed the bags, he booked passage on the side wheeler Sultana; even sprang for first class. That night, back in the cabin after a nice steak dinner with all the fixings, she held out a small leather book.

“What’s this?”

“Our bank book.”

He took it and opened it up. The number surprised him. “Thirty-two thousand dollars? Am I reading this right?”

“Yes, sir, and we have another fifteen hundred in the bank at Glenn Falls.” She stepped close and put both hands on his chest. “Our lawyer is working on getting the rest of it, we’ve got money in banks all over the country and overseas, but making them give it up takes lawyers.”

“No wonder you wanted to go first class. What are you going to do with all that money?”

“We, silly. It’s our money, not just mine. We can do whatever we

want.”

The wheels in his head began to turn. He had money of his own in the bank in Clarksville, but a mere pittance compared to her fortune.

“Want to buy the Rusks’ place?”

“Sure. Why not? I’d love living there, but... What about Aunt Rebecca? I mean, assuming...there...uh...wasn’t a miracle or anything.”

“It’d be perfect for us. Uncle Henry’s been saying when the war is over, he’s taking Aunt May to Llano. Going to build her that mansion. Aunt Rebecca was talking about just staying in the big house before I left.”

Covering her hands with his, he nuzzled her ear. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. I’ve... Oh. Excuse me. We have another three hundred forty dollars in gold. I’ve been spending the paper money. Might have thirty greenbacks or so left. Plus the silver.”

His brows arched, and she slipped her hands around his waist, snuggling in tight. “How’s the arm?”

“What arm?”

Before she could answer, he kissed her quiet.



It certainly surprised Lacey how fast the Sultana made Memphis, But her husband explained about the Mississippi flowing at a constant six knots, add that to the side-wheeler’s ten, and instead of the three hundred and twelve miles taking three-plus days going up river, she stood on the Memphis wharf eighteen hours after leaving St. Louis.

The nag nipping at her heart grew with each mile the stage bounced and swayed toward Clarksville. Wonder the thing didn’t rattle her brains out...or worse.

He wanted to press on, but she insisted on getting a room in Hot Springs. Apparently, Charley holding their cash had loosened his purse strings. He asked right out, once the bags were retrieved from the driver, for the location of the town’s best hotel.

At the Arlington Hotel’s registration desk, much to her delight, he wanted the finest room, didn’t even ask the price.

She did notice the wince when he paid the seven dollars.

But it surprised her the most when he slipped the porter a dime for bringing the bags. As though he was some dandy. But then he closed and locked the door and turned, his face like flint. “What’s wrong, baby?”

How could he know? She answered her own question. Because he knew her so well. No secrets belonged between her and her beloved, so she swallowed and hunted the right words. “You...Mother...

home...without Uncle...the baby...everything, I guess.”

The flint melted. “Me, first? What have I done now?”

“It’s nothing you’ve done other than joining the Confederates and being honor-bound to go back to the war. What if you get killed? Then what?”

“Grant’s got Lee bottled up, sweetheart. They aren’t interested in Texas. Uncle Henry is not going to let anything happen to us.”

“You don’t know that. What about Uncle Wallace? He couldn’t stop that, could he? The war is going to last until next spring when the baby’s due...maybe even later.”

“And you don’t know that. Not for sure.”

“I know this. I can’t stand the thought of you going back. Can’t we hire someone to take your place?”

“Sweetheart, no. Now what kind of man would I be if I did that? I could never meet my father or Uncle Henry—or the looking glass for that matter—eye to eye again.”

Tears overflowed. She’d expected him to say just that, but still hated hearing it. Why was he....

Like a cool breeze on a hot day, Mister Dither’s words blew through her heart. He’d told her about Charley’s son, and her baby’s son being men of God, called to greatness. She blinked away the salty wetness then wiped her cheeks.

“You’re right. I know you have to go. But there’s nothing in Heaven or earth that can make me like it. I don’t ever want to be apart again.”

Stepping to her, he wrapped his good arm around her. “I don’t either. The thought of leaving you rips my heart. But it makes me glad that you understand I’ve got to go.”

She laid her forehead on his chest and snuggled in tight, but instead of kissing her like she wanted, he leaned back. “What about your mother?”

“You know what Uncle Henry always says is in the Bible. Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. I’m a half-breed to her, and now she’s going to hate me all the more, coming home carrying this baby, and....”

“No. She loves you, Lacey. Haven’t you ever spouted something in anger? When I got home with Uncle, she’d worried herself sick over you running off.”

How could she face her? All of them? She leaned out and looked him in the eyes. “Will you tell them for me, please? I’ve been trying to find the right words, but....”

“Yes, I will. And if need be, I’ll shoot anyone who says a word against you. Feed ’em to the hogs. ”

“Oh, don’t be silly! You don’t need to shoot anyone.”

He smiled. "It's going to be fine. Everyone loves you, Lacey. Why do you think they offered so much reward?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too. Now I know if Uncle's gone like we suspect, then it'll be hard, for both of us. But I can't do anything about that. We'll just have to get through it together. As for the baby...you have nothing to be ashamed of. You were a married woman, and now you're a widow carrying your dead husband's child. So was Aunt Sue. No shame there. Was there something else I've missed about our little blessing?"

"No, that's all."

His words comforted her some. He always knew exactly what to say, but still...late of a night, waiting for sleep...she could hear her mother. The mean, hateful tone in her voice. Calling her a half-breed. Whatsoever things were lovely and pure and worthy of a good report. That's all she needed to think on.

And she had plenty of things that fit the bill.

Backing up a step, she took his good arm. "Best come to bed now, Mister."

The next morning, the eighth day of August, 1864, after a nice soak in Hot Springs' famed medicinal springs, she found herself heading west once again.

So much had happened since she'd left Texas, but no matter how much her husband told her otherwise, her mother's hateful words rode with her.

Each time the driver blew his bugle at the next stage, the muscles in her neck tightened another notch, her stomach soured even more, and each breath came a bit harder.

After the stagecoach left DeKalb, she wanted to jump off at each turn, or better, hide in the luggage boot.

Maybe she should just ride on to Dallas, except, no. Charley would never hear of that. He'd been so nice, holding her hand and talking all sweet, but still he wasn't the one who ran off or was about to have to face the music.

The last trump sounded.

The square of Clarksville, Texas, came into view. Looked the same except she hadn't really got used to the new courthouse—even though it went up in '59, a couple of years before she left. She never figured on seeing it again.

Only five miles to Uncle Henry and Aunt May's house, her mother's place of employment. The place she lived and called home.

Where Lacey had spent the first sixteen years of her life.

"Do we have to?"

"Sweetheart, everything is going to be fine." He smiled. "And if it

isn't, you can hide in your room, and I'll deal with it."

She tried to return his smile, but her lips wouldn't have it. "Promise?"

"I do. You have my word. Now come on, I've hired a surrey."

When the driver turned off the main road heading up to the big house, she squeezed Charley's hand so hard it was a wonder he didn't slap her. But her sweet, kind husband only patted her arm then hugged her tighter.

At the last turn, she closed her eyes and went to praying. She forgot to breathe.


Charlotte squealed. "It's Charley! Charley's home! And he's got Lacey Rose with him! Hurry, everyone! Charley's home!"

Pandemonium broke out. Folks poured forth from the house. She spotted her mother. For a heartbeat, she froze. She didn't mean to cry, but tears flowed down her cheeks.

Her mother stared for a long minute, then ran to her with her arms wider than they'd ever been. Charley stepped aside, and she enveloped Lacey in her embrace and swayed and hugged tighter and tighter.

"Oh, my beautiful, darling daughter! You've come home!"

Epilogue



After two days of telling and retelling his and Lacey's stories and two nights of love and tears, Charley returned to San Antonio.

Stopping at his uncle's grave on the way out, he shed tears, but knew for sure, he'd see him again.

Once back in the army, not much had changed. His father and uncle were in good health. His boys about wore him out bragging on their great cavalry charge the day after the Battle of Laredo.

Bart confided in him later about how scared they both were, and how sad it made him having to kill a bluecoat.

For the next few months, only a few minor skirmishes popped up. No major battles.

Exactly as Mister Dithers prophesied, Lee surrendered to Grant on the ninth of April, 1865, followed by Johnson on the twenty-sixth of the same month. Kirby Smith, the big general in charge of Texas—after some talk of fighting on—surrendered exactly one month after Johnson.

Henry Buckmeyer, true to his nature, had made a tidy profit buying Confederate cotton and hauling it to Mexican ports where his agents sold it to foreign buyers.

Saddened the man that his and Sam Houston's dreams of a second Republic of Texas were dashed, but he never harbored any notion of fighting on.

Charley Nightingale and the rest of his kin, save Wallace Rusk, returned home to a county-wide celebration on the third day of June. He and Lacey bought the old Rusk place from Aunt Rebecca, and lived in marital bliss for a few years, but what happened next is a whole new story.

The End

The Texas Romance Family Saga Titles

Book #1 VOW UNBROKEN, 1832

Book #2 HEARTS STOLEN, 1839-1844

Book #3 HOPE REBORN, 1850-1851

Book #4 SINS OF THE MOTHERS, 1851-1852

Book #5 DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, 1853-1854

Book #6 JUST KIN, 1861-1865

Additional titles planned either in this series or as companion books to the series:

AT LIBERTY TO LOVE 1865-

THE BEDWARMER'S SON 1862 / 1929 (parallel stories)

THE CHIEF OF SINNERS 1926-1950

SON OF PROMISE 1955

Characters...alphabetically

Warning! Reader beware! Spoiler warning!

If you aren't up to date on reading the series, you might find out info you'd rather wait to know.

The Bayers

1822 – Sue Baylor marries Andrew Baylor.

1823 – Andrew and brother Jacob are killed in an accident, leaving five-year-old Levi an orphan for Sue to rear. Later that year, Rebecca, Sue & Andrew's daughter is born.



~ **Baylor, LEVI Bartholomew** – born November 2, 1817 orphaned at age five; was reared by Aunt Sue Baylor until fourteen, then Uncle Henry Buckmeyer, too, after he married Aunt Sue. Levi became husband to Rosaleen ‘Sassy’ or ‘Rose’ Fogelsong Nightingale Baylor and step-father to Charley Nightingale and Bart Baylor (Comanche Chief Bold Eagle’s son); then Pa to Stephen Austin, Daniel Boone,

Wallace Rusk, and Rachel Rose.

HIS TITLE: HEARTS STOLEN

On Scene in: VOW UNBROKEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, and mentioned in contemporary Red River Romance SING A NEW SONG

~ **Baylor, Rosaleen 'ROSE' (SASSY) Summer Fogelsong**

Nightingale – born August 24, 1823, married at fifteen in the fall of '38 to Charles Nightingale, then stolen by the Comanche in the summer of '39. She lived with the tribe five years as the captive third wife of the chief, birthing Nightingale's son in February, 1840, until being rescued in October of 1844 by the Texas Rangers. She married Levi in mid-December of that same year. She gave birth to Bartholomew, the Comanche chief's blood son in 1845, followed by Stephen Austin in April, 1846, Daniel Boone in '49, and Wallace Rusk in '53. She finally had a baby girl, Rachel Rose.

HER TITLE: HEARTS STOLEN

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN,

Mention in: VOW UNBROKEN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Baylor, Bartholomew 'BART'** – born July 20, 1845 to Rose and Levi, but blood son of Comanche chief Bold Eagle

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, and JUST KIN

Mention in: HEARTS STOLEN

~ **Briggs, Clayton 'CLAY' Butterfield** – born October 13, 1827 to J.T. and Maud Briggs. He courts and marries Gwendolyn Buckmeyer.

HIS TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Briggs, Jake – born in 1812. Clay's older brother is married to Clover and has son Jasper with her.

On Scene in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Briggs, Jasper – born in 1837 to Jasper and Clover "Clovey"

On Scene in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ **Boyd, Francine 'FRANCY'** – born October 28, 1842, a California orphan God sends to Jethro to take to Mary Rachel. She quickly becomes a part of the family.

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHER, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

The Buckmeyers

1832 – Sue meets and marries Henry Buckmeyer.

1833-1844 – Sue gives Henry four daughters, Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn Belle, Cecelia Carol, and Bonnie Claire, and a son, Samuel Houston, then leaves him a widower.

1850 – Henry marries May Meriwether.



1851-1854 – May gives Henry a son, David Crockett, and a daughter, Meri Charlotte.

~ **Buckmeyer, BONNIE Claire** – born December 2, 1840. Henry and Sue's fourth child.

HER TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ **Buckmeyer, CECELIA Carol 'CeCe'** – born April 10, 1836. Henry and Sue's third child. Marries Elijah Eversole in 1854.

HER TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ **Buckmeyer, David Crockett** – born October 4, 1851
firstborn of Henry and May.

On Scene in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ **Buckmeyer, GWENDOLYN Belle or 'Gwen'** – born Nov. 29, 1834.
Henry and Sue's second child. Married Clay Briggs in 1854.

HER TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN, AT
LIBERTY TO LOVE

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ Buckmeyer, Meri 'Charlotte' born in 1854 to Henry and May.

On Scene in: JUST KIN

~ **Buckmeyer, Patrick HENRY** - born March 6, 1798; killed a man at fifteen, fought in the Battle of New Orleans at sixteen. At thirty-four, he married Susannah 'Sue' Baylor in 1832, and became stepfather to her Rebecca and father to Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn Belle, Cecelia Carol, and Bonnie Claire before becoming a widower in Dec '44 at his son Houston's birth. Finding love again, he married May Meriwether in 1850 and fathered Crockett and Charlotte.

HIS TITLE: VOW UNBROKEN, HOPE REBORN

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE
MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO
LOVE

~ **Buckmeyer, Sam HOUSTON** – born December 11, 1844. Henry and Sue's fifth child, first son. His mother passed at his birth, so was motherless until he was six years old.

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST
KIN

Mention in: HEARTS STOLEN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS
OF THE HEART

~ **Buckmeyer, Susannah 'SUE' Alicia Abbott Baylor** – born May 15, 1803, married Andrew Baylor at eighteen in 1821, widowed at nineteen and became guardian aunt to orphaned Levi Baylor, birthed Rebecca in the next year. At twenty-nine, she married Henry Buckmeyer in 1832. Mother to Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn, Cecelia, Bonnie Claire, and Samuel Houston.

HER TITLE: VOW UNBROKEN

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN

Mention in: HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF

THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ **Dempsey, Frederica ‘FREDDIE’** May’s publisher who Charley turns to for help in New York City on his search for Lacey Rose. She has a widowed daughter, Marah O’Connor

~ **Eversole, ELIJAH** – born January 2, 1826, moved to California in the gold rush days where his parents abandoned him as a teen. He followed in his father’s blacksmith trade and loves inventing and building new helpful machines. Jethro Risen and Moses Jones make him a partner in a gold mine. He marries Cecelia Buckmeyer in 1854.
HIS TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Jeffcoat, **CLAUDIA**, a wealthy married woman and avid reader of dime romances who befriended and helped Charley on his search for Lacey Rose. Pauleen Shriver’s sister.

Mention in: JUST KIN

~ Jones, **LANELLE** Wheeler – born February 26, 1831, Caleb’s cousin, John’s sister, marries Moses Jones in early fall 1851.

On scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ Jones, **MOSES** – born October 13, 1816, a Scot partnered with Jethro Risen in a gold mine, marries Lanelle Wheeler in 1854.

On scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS // *Mentioned in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Jones, ‘**JOSH**’ua Jethro, also ‘**JONESY**’ – born January 19, 1852 to Moses and Lanelle, but the blood son of Caleb Wheeler

~ **Meriwether, CHESTER** born a slave on October 7, 1803 to Commodore Meriwether’s field hands Silas and Honey Pie. He was 5, about to be 6, when his half-sister Millicent May was born. He marries **JEWEL** (formerly Mammy) in 1851.

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART //

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, JUST KIN

~ **Meriwether, JEWEL (formerly Mammy) Rozier** the Buckmeyers’ cook after Henry rescued her and her son Jean Paul Rozier who also works for the Buckmeyers.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART //

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, JUST KIN

~ **Meriwether, Millicent MAY** born August 23, 1808 to the Commodore and her mother. A successful New York dime novelist, May heads to Texas to interview a couple of Texas Rangers for new inspiration after seeing a newspaper article about Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk. She marries Henry Buckmeyer there and gives birth to David Crockett in 1851 and Charlotte in 1854.

HER TITLE: HOPE REBORN //

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Meriwether, Silas born a slave in 1808 on the Meriwethers' Sea Side plantation, father of Chester and also blood father of May

Mention in: HOPE REBORN

~ **Nightingale, CHARLES Nathaniel, Senior** - born 1805, married Rosaleen Fogelsong and fathered Charley, though was never around him.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN

~ **Nightingale, Charles 'CHARLEY' Nathaniel** - born son to a Comanche chief Feb 27 '40 to the captive third wife Rosaleen, but Charles Nightingale was his mother's husband and Charley's blood father. He's rescued in 1844 with his mother by Texas Rangers Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk. He killed a man at ten when Comancheros came to steal him and his mother to return them to Bold Eagle.

HIS TITLE: JUST KIN

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ **Nightingale, LACEY Rose Langley** born November 16, 1844 in Nacogdoches to Laura, only fourteen when Lacey's father, a Comanche brave, had captured her. Marries Charley in November, 1865

HER TITLE: JUST KIN

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ O'Connor, Curry CYLE, Junior Marah' fourteen year old son

Mention in: JUST KIN

~ O'Connor, CURRY Cyle, Senior Marah's dead husband

Mention in: JUST KIN

~ **O'Connor, MARAH** A beautiful older woman (29) who almost

wins Charley's heart. She breeds thoroughbreds and is the daughter of Freddie – May's publisher who helped Charley in New York

~ **Risen, JETHRO** – born September 22, 1830 partner of Moses Jones in a gold mine. Married Mary Rachel Buckmeyer Wheeler in 1853 and later that year, reconnected with his estranged father. Founds an orphanage and a bank in San Francisco.

HIS TITLE: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

On Scene in: AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

Mention in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Risen, MARY RACHEL Buckmeyer Wheeler** – born August 3, 1833. Henry and Sue's firstborn eloped with Caleb Wheeler without Daddy's blessing and moved to San Francisco. Her husband soon murdered, she's a widow mother of Susannah "SUSIE" Wheeler. Remarried Jethro Risen, adopted an orphan, Francine "FRANCY" and birthed baby girl Rebecca "BECCA" in April, 1853 and Silas Reuel, Jethro's firstborn son, in December, 1854.

HER TITLE: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ **Rozier, JOHN PAUL** son of the Buckmeyer's cook, Mammy or later, Jewel. He and his mother were freed by their former owner when he died and both went to work for Henry. Her in the kitchen, him supervising the cotton fields. He marries Laura Langley, another soul Henry took in.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN

Mention in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Rozier, LAURA Langley** was rescued at fifteen in 1844 along with Sassy. Pregnant at the time, she delivered the next month—a baby girl, Lacey Rose on the way to the Buckmeyers' for Thanksgiving. She stays on there as teacher and marries Jean Paul Rozier.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN

Mention in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Rusk, REBECCA Ruth Baylor** – born June 12, 1823; Sue's daughter by 1st husband Andrew (who died before Rebecca's birth). Nine years old on the Jefferson Trace in 1832 then twenty-one in 1844, when she finally met Wallace Rusk. Married him at age twenty-seven in 1850. No children.

HER TITLE: AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

On Scene in: VOW UNBROKEN, HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Rusk, WALLACE** – born August 15, 1819, a sixteen-year-old orphan picked up by Henry Buckmeyer and young Levi Baylor on the way to the Battle of San Jacinto, served with Levi Texas Rangering, fell in love with his sister Rebecca sight-unseen, and after wearing her down, married her in 1850. No children, but Lacey Rose Langley Nightingale was named after him.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN

Mention in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Shriver, PAULEEN a Wealthy married woman and avid reader of dime romances who befriended Charley on his search for Lacey Rose

Mention in: JUST KIN

~ Wheeler, Caleb – born August 29, 1828, cousin to John and Lanelle, partners in the Mercantile in San Francisco after eloping with Mary Rachel Buckmeyer in 1851, father of Susannah.

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHER

~ Wheeler, John – born April 17, 1825, Lanelle's brother, Caleb's cousin, partner in San Francisco Mercantile.

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHER

~ **Wheeler, Susannah "SUSIE"** – born October, 1851 in San Francisco to Mary Rachel (father Caleb deceased)

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS

Mention in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

Oooowee! Twice blessed! Miss Jewel served her prize-winning Bread Pudding and her Blackberry Cobbler in Just Kin!

And I have the recipes, but updated for you! You may thank my author friend Ann Everett (A.K.A. Pattiecake McAlister) who recently debuted a MUST-HAVE new cookbook, SWEET THANGS! It's a perfect gift cookbook, full of scrumdilliumptious recipes.

And I know...she tested them on our writers' group colleagues, so I helped sample as she went! I highly, enthusiastically recommend Sweet Thangs!



Bread Pudding

Ingredients

- 2 cups day old bread, cut into cubes
- 2 cups milk
- 3 Tablespoons Butter
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cups granulated sugar
- 3 Tablespoons Butter
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cups granulated sugar



More Ingredients

2 eggs
Dash of salt
1 teaspoon vanilla

Directions

- ~ Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.
- ~ Place bread cubes in a 1-quart buttered baking dish.
- ~ Scald milk with butter and sugar. (That means bring it almost to boiling and remove from heat) Stir constantly, because milk scorches easily. Let it cool to warm.
- ~ Beat the eggs slightly; add the salt; then stir in the warm milk and the vanilla.
- ~ Pour over the bread cubes.
- ~ Set the baking dish in a pan containing warm water up to the level of the pudding and bake for about 1 hour, or until a small knife comes out clean when inserted in center of pudding.
- ~ Pudding comes out risen...but will fall as it cools.

In Texas, we eat warm bread pudding with Blue Bell Homemade Vanilla ice cream ☐ Y'all enjoy!

Blackberry Cobbler

Mix together and set aside:

4 cups fresh blackberries, sweetened with 2 cups granulated sugar



butter, melted

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1 stick margarine or

Crust:

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 cup shortening

COLD water

You'll also need:

Extra sugar for sprinkling on top

Directions

~ Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.

~ In a bowl, place the flour and shortening, blend until crumbly, then add the COLD water, 2 Tablespoons at a time, until you have moist dough. (you want your dough pretty moist/wet)

~ Divide the dough into two balls.

~ With rolling pin, roll each ball on floured surface until about the size of your pan.

~ Into greased pan, layer half of fruit mixture.

Top with one rolled crust, then layer remainder of fruit mixture and top with remaining crust.

- ~ Brush with melted butter and sprinkle with sugar.
- ~ Bake until top crust is golden brown. Approximately 30-45 minutes.

Caryl's Other Titles

& Five-Star Reviews

Historical Texas Romances



...for **Vow Unbroken**

With an intriguing plot line and well-developed characters, McAdoo, who's written nonfiction and children's fiction, delivers an engaging read for her first adult historical romance. --*Publishers Weekly*

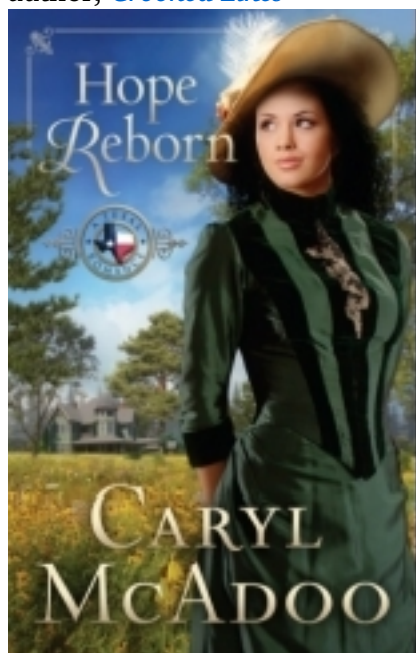
After reading Caryl McAdoo's story of Henry and Susannah in "VOW UNBROKEN," I felt like I'd had another adventure with Tom Sawyer and Becky, this time as young adults.

--Alan Daugherty: columnist *The News-Banner*



...for **Hearts Stolen**

Get ready for a wild, uplifting, heart-tugging, page-turning ride. *Hearts Stolen* grabbed me at the start. Sassy's feisty, fighting spirit...I couldn't set it down. Burnt dinner, but forget eating, I ate this book up. This master storyteller weaves Texas history into a well-crafted plot with unforgettable and totally loved characters. --Holly Michael, author, [Crooked Lines](#)



...for **Hope Reborn**

With memorable characters, Caryl's signature humor, and plenty of adventure, drama, and romance, "Hope Reborn" is anything but fluff. A strong message of salvation runs through, but well within

the storyline. Enjoyed a unique twist with May writing the stories of the previous characters – clever and fun!

--Pam Morrison, Tennessee reader



...for **Sins of the Mothers**

I tell you what, folks, this girl can write! I do love this series, and maybe most especially this book Mary Rachel Buckmeyer is smart as a whip. She can out-negotiate the experts, out-guess marketing trends, and out-stubborn a mule. Trouble is, she tends to follow her heart into disaster. She falls in love with Caleb Wheeler, a man her father says is a boy. As she finds out, he's not only irresponsible, he has a meandering eye, lies like a braided rug, and has all the loyalty of a new-born pup. Mary hops from one frying pan to another until one man shows up who could steady her and get her out of the fixes she gets herself into. But again, trouble is she might throw him away. When will this girl ever learn? Such a great story! I know you'll love.

--Anne Baxter Campbell, author *The Truth Trilogy: The Roman's Quest, Marcus Varitor, Centurion*, and *The Truth Doesn't Die*



...for **Daughters of the Heart**

A fun packed Christian romance novel with plenty of action, heartbreak, tears, deception, twists, and turns. [The three sisters] made a pact never to break their father's heart, but when suitors show up, it's hard for them to stay determined. Will they find true love? Will Dad accept a suitor for them and give his blessings?

--Joy Gibson, a Tennessee reader
and pastor's wife

Contemporary Red River Romances



...for *The Preacher's Faith*

Great story! Hope there's a sequel, and I'd love to see the artful dodger as a part of it. Maybe a reunion? And he could find his mother. Just love curling up in an afghan with a cup of cappuccino and reading Caryl's books! Keep on writing!

--Lenda Selph, Texas reader

This was my first book to read by Caryl McAdoo and I absolutely loved it. I will be reading more. I love the way she prays that her story gives God Glory and dedicates The Preacher's Faith to Him and His Kingdom...a good clean book to read. I was drawn into this story right from the start. I loved this book and can't wait for book two.

--Elizabeth 'Liz' Dent, Alabama reader



...for **Sing a New Song**

Sing a New Song is a delightful breath of air. Caryl eloquently brings her audience nearer to God [with] fresh ways of viewing Christian life and all it offers. The characters are loveable and humorous. Illuminating, the story shares the Gospel beautifully. Samuel's sermons as well as the gorgeous lyrics of Mary Esther's songs fill our hearts with newfound worship. Truly an inspiring tale. Christian fiction in its best; a romantic love story that brings its readers closer to God. A treasure for sure.

--Christine Barber, author of *Broken to Pieces*



...for *One and Done*

Faster than a major league outfielder pulling down a popup fly ball, Caryl McAdoo's romance is guaranteed to snag baseball lovers and romance readers alike. This Christian story is written with wit, verve and Caryl McAdoo's usual flare for dialect and spicy dialogue. Be warned. Those readers searching for a saccharine, man-meets-woman story will soon discover this is no sanitized romantic fairy tale. From the beginning, the reader will identify with real people who live clearly in the mind, so much so, that a person can almost smell locker room sweat or the mouthwatering scent of spicy Mexican food. Identification with the hero and heroine is nearly immediate. With so much to rave about, this review cannot begin to cover all the delightful surprises, so the reader simply must buy "One and Done" to see for themselves.

--Cass Wessel, multi-published devotional author

Contemporary Apple Orchard Romance



...for *Lady Luck's a Loser*

A very unique, witty plot. I couldn't put it down. I love that my favorite characters are still very much active at the end of the book only their relationships have changed. What a way for Dub to fulfill his promises to his deceased wife. Love, trust, forgiveness, and many emotions make for a well written book.

--Joy Gibson, Tennessee reader

The Generations Biblical fiction



...for *A Little Lower Than the*

Angels

Caryl McAdoo used her research and knowledge of biblical scripture combined with an incredible imagination as a foundation to fill in the gaps of the story of Adam and Eve and their children. I was caught up in the story from page one to the ending. I particularly appreciated the "Search the Scriptures" section at the end which explains some of the Biblical clues for this work of fiction. I loved it and highly recommend it. --Judy Levine, reader, Arizona

...for Then the Deluge Comes



Deluge is the second book in The Generations Series, and if the books still to follow are as good as this one and the first one in the series are it is going to be an incredible series. The author has a way of breathing life and emotions into the characters that made me feel like I was on the sidelines watching their stories unfold. This is some of the best Biblical fiction that I have read and I look forward to the rest of the series. I was furnished with an e-copy of the book in return for an honest review. --Ann Ellis, reader, Texas



...for Replenish the Earth

Caryl tells the story of the flood in such a unique way.. I like how she makes the characters so real. This Bible story just comes to life. Noah's family on the Ark taking care of the animals and then when they come to a stop, starting all over on a barren earth. I found that the family conversations, their actions and the descriptions just made this more real to me. I like that Caryl gives scripture references and her thoughts at the end of the book

--Deanna Stevens, reader, Nebraska

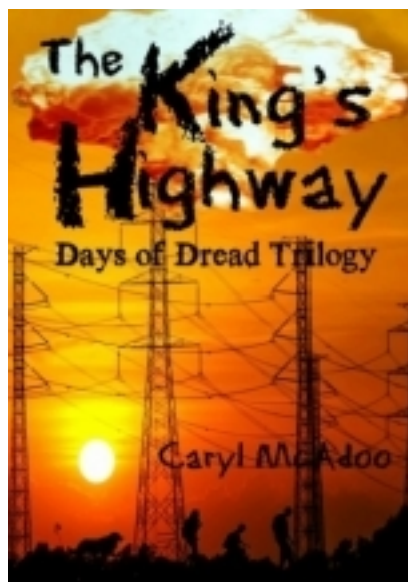


...for Children of Eber

So much of the tale remains faithful to the Scriptural account, but where there is silence, Caryl's author voice sings through in delicious detail. For the reader familiar with the Biblical account, she fleshes out a mere paragraph or two until the narrative vibrates with life. As if transported through a time machine, the reader reenters the world of the Ancients experiencing their lives and seeing their surroundings afresh. Those who know the Biblical account will delight in following the ancient pair into Egypt, then back to Canaan again.

--Cass Wessel, multi-published devotional author

Mid-Grade that Grandparents love



...The King's Highway

I can't remember when I have enjoyed reading a book as much as this one. If I really like a book, I can read it in a day. I read this twice in two days. I couldn't quit reading. It has to be right up there with my all-time favorites. If anyone thinks they won't read it because it's for mid-grade, I encourage you to reconsider. You'll miss a blessing. Anyone reading age from the mid grades to senior citizens (that's me) will love this book. The characters in the book are delightful.

--Louise Koiner, reader, Texas

Non-Fiction



...for *Story & Style, The Craft of Writing Creative Fiction*

This is a wonderful book for those wanting to learn more about writing. I know from experience. The content helped me

tremendously!! It especially helped me gain a clear picture of POV and the use of action versus attribution to strengthen my writing and make my debut book the best it can be. Thank you, Caryl, your continued helping hands are a blessing to many of us rookie writers!!

--Andy Skrzynski, author of *The New World, A Step Backward*

And Coming Soon...

...in the Texas Romance series

At Liberty to Love

The Bedwarmer's Son,

The Chief of Sinners

The Son of Promise

...in the Days of Dread Trilogy

The Sixth Trumpet

Jackson marches back into danger to rescue his mom after he dreams of her whereabouts. Al follows his captain, but no one knew Aria did, too.

The Kidron Valley

For your enjoyment, I offer a preview of book seven in the historical Texas Romance series...coming in May, 2016. Wallace didn't want to strap his beautiful wife with a cripple. He said it himself...he wanted her to be 'at liberty to love.' He adored her that much.

At Liberty to Love

Chapter One Sample

Clarksville Texas, October 2, 1865

“Are you sure about this?”

Rebecca nodded. “Yes, Daddy. I’ve considered every angle and studied long and hard on it. I am certain, and my mind is made up.”

He closed his eyes as though he couldn’t stand watching her leave. “I hate this.”

A chuckle threatened, but he was being so pathetic, she swallowed it. “I know, but don’t worry. I’ll be back before you know it.”

His lids lifted, then he leaned in a bit and lowered his voice. “You’ve got both Derringers?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you’re wearing the petticoat Laura made you?”

Mother May punched his arm. “Henry, leave her be. She’s a grown woman.”

“Mercy, baby. I hate this.”

“You’ve already said that, Daddy.” Movement caught her eye. The driver hustled from the stage’s boot up to the front then climbed aboard next to the guard. “Looks like he’s ready to go, and that I’m his only hold-up.” She reached up and kissed the-only-father-she’d-ever-known’s cheek then hugged Mother May. “I love you both.”

More hugs and kisses followed. One each for her to pass along to west coast clan. She thought they might never stop, but soon found herself waving from her window until the dust cloud blocked her view.

Hard even for her to believe it, but there she was. Really doing it. A big part of her heart remained on the boardwalk in front of the Donoho with her parents. Except they weren’t, not really. Neither one of them.

From the first, she’d known that God sent Henry Buckmeyer in answer to her prayers. And, of course, her perfect daddy proved to be the perfect husband for her mother, too. Wow, that had been thirty-three years ago, and she was two years younger than Charlotte then. Hard to believe her littlest sister was eleven already.

What a trip lay ahead!

Traveling over the exact same ground as in ‘32 where she’d almost immediately fallen in love with her step-father. But she’d never thought of him that way, not since the beginning. Why, she’d been calling him Daddy from the second day on the Jefferson Trace.

Good thing her mother said yes when he asked her. She smiled remembering her mother’s stories about meeting and marrying the

love of her life. She really never should have agreed since he wasn't saved yet, but he'd captured her heart by then, and her blurting out yes kept everything in God's plan.

Another smile crossed her lips remembering her own husband.

Daddy always claimed he would never have proposed to Mama again if she'd turned him down that first time. But Wallace? He'd asked Rebecca more than a hundred times at the least. He would never have quit until she agreed to marry, that was for sure and for certain.

The man had no pride when it came to loving her. He was a good man.

She stared out the window.

The landscape hadn't changed much, but the means of travel definitely progressed. Back then, two mules could only pull a loaded wagon ten miles a day. Twelve or thirteen took some doing. The stage covered the same distance in a single hour. She loved it. But like Mama, still hated the dust and the coach's swaying and bumping.

"Going far?"

She looked up.

On the opposite bench, a matron smiled, sitting next to what appeared to be her husband.

"Yes, ma'am. On my way to California."

"Oh, dear, sweetheart. You're going the wrong way."

She smiled. "I know, but I've chosen to take the easy route even though it's a bit longer. I've loved riding steamboats since only a girl."

"Oh, I see. We're staying in Mount Pleasant a few days. Louie, here..." She patted the man's hand. "He's a watchmaker, and we figured he can find a week's worth of work, maybe longer. We get to move around a lot, see the country now that the children are grown."

"Yes, ma'am, maybe even a month the way Titus County has been growing. If you get by Mister Andrew's Titus Trading Post, please tell him Rebecca Buckmeyer sent her love."

"I'd be pleased to."

"He's an old friend."

In the next three hours, she learned way more about the couple than she ever wanted to know, but the conversation helped pass the time, and she'd only brought three novels...not that Jefferson and New Orleans didn't have stores that stocked books. She could hardly wait to get into Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. She'd been saving it.

At Mount Pleasant, the couple said their good-byes and promised to visit the Titus Trading Post. A man dressed in an ill-fitting corduroy suit climbed aboard, taking the window seat on the opposite bench. The driver hollered for all to board, but no one else did. Leather

snapped, and at his ho, the coach lurched forward, pushing her back into the seat.

The oversized wheels turned. They'd be fun to ride up as she had on the trace when she was nine. Grown, though, she could understand her mother's horror at her fearless feat. The thought brought a giggle, and she immediately glanced at the gentleman who appeared to be ignoring her. Which was fine. Maybe she'd read.

She went for a hankie to cover her mouth, slipping her hand in her purse.

A wave of unease washed over her.

Instead of the lacey handkerchief, her fingers found the Derringer's trigger, and she positioned her clutch so that the gun's barrel pointed right at the stranger. Not that the new passenger seemed all that threatening. Rather, he reminded her of someone she knew, although she couldn't quite put her finger on who.

Daddy would be proud.

Always...better safe than sorry. That's what Mama said. What had it been? Almost twenty-one years since she passed. She'd never quit missing her.

The position proved uncomfortable, trying to read with one hand in her purse. Not to mention all the bumping and swaying. And though the man looked her way now and again, he'd neither said nor done anything to suggest he meant her harm. She chocked her anxiousness up to traveling alone for the first time ever in her forty-two years.

Adjusting to lean against her corner, she abandoned the pistol and changed the book from her left hand to the right then went back to reading.

A bit before Dangerfield, the man tapped the bench.

She looked up. He stared, and she matched his gaze. But holding it proved a bit difficult...his blue eyes...so deep... threatened to pull her in. What? She'd never....

He grinned. "I should have known it, first thing."

Thankful for speech to break the temptation of falling into those azure pools, she couldn't resist responding. "And what would that be?"

"You're Rebecca Rusk."

"Do I know you, sir?"

"No, but I know you, well, in a roundabout way." He tipped the bowler. "Condolences, ma'am, on your husband's demise. He sure didn't tell the half of it."

"I'm sorry. To what are you referring?"

"Your beauty. Wallace and Levi never missed a chance to brag on your looks."

She made her eyes return to her book, the man's baritone much too melodious to encourage. Her cheeks warmed, and his words tugged at the piece of her heart Wallace's stubbornness had scarred. Despite her resolve not to, she looked up. "How is it you know my husband and brother?"

"I served in General Buckmeyer's regiment." A finger brushed the short brim of his silly looking hat. "Major Ford at your service, ma'am."

"Thought you were a Colonel?"

"No, that's my cousin Rip."

"You have a given name?"

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned again, flashing his perfect teeth. "Are Bart and Houston well, doing good?"

"They are." The man had her at a disadvantage. She stiffened her back and stared right into his baby blues. "Where are you headed, Major?"

"Memphis. I've applied at the university there."

"Oh, I see." Mixed emotions roiled inside. A part of her relaxed, relieved that at Jefferson, he'd be going north, but another, disappointed he wouldn't be going on to New Orleans. "So you're going back to finish your education? Now that the war is over? Very commendable."

"No, ma'am. Offering my services in mathematics or Latin, perhaps both. Doesn't matter what I teach."

His rich, soothing tone washed over her, followed with a refreshing wave of his eloquent words. She had to look away. A man of letters. Yet he wore such an ill-fitting suit and ridiculous hat. Glancing back his way, she eyed him. "If I may suggest...perchance... might you consider more appropriate dress prior to your interview?"

He snickered. "Not everyone is as well-heeled as your father."

"True." Her words had no ill effect on the man, as if he deemed what he wore of no consequence—much the same as what he would be teaching. Did the man care about anything? "Perhaps you should have come to Clarksville first. Daddy would have loaned you money for a new suit and a proper hat."

Without a hitch in that smile of his, he removed the bowler and flung the silly thing out the open window. "Shall I toss the suit as well?"

"No, of course not." She searched the page for her place then looked right back up, cheeks warm again. "Well...do you have another?"

"I do not, but if you're so concerned that my attire might dampen my chances at employment, perhaps trousers and a cotton shirt would win the day."

Before she could answer, the driver blew the bugle outside the town that had sprung up around Captain Dangerfield's spring. The first place Daddy held Mama's hand.

"I've got needle and thread in my bag. Alterations could make a big difference."

Why had she said that? Sewing on the stage would most likely prick every fingertip and only get blood all over his only suit, making things worse. But how could she not help one of Wallace's comrades-in-arms?

Maybe ignoring that she'd mentioned it would accomplish its purpose. She'd just fetch her kit in the chance it did not.

"Well, I do thank you for your condolences, sir."



The stay in Dangerfield allowed Ford an opportunity to change. If the lady could improve the second hand suit he'd found in Dallas, then why not?

Back in his seat with the stage once again heading south, he handed over the corduroy coat first. "The pants aren't too bad."

Rebecca took his offering. "Hold out your arm, fingers straight out."

He complied, reaching across the center bench. "Thank you again, Mis'ess Rusk."

She spread her cloth tape measure from his shoulder to his wrist. Her fingers touched his skin lightly and sent a warmth straight to his heart, but he kept a straight face. It disappointed him a bit that she hadn't told him to call her Rebecca.

Wait! He knew. "Marcus Aurelius."

She smiled—the first one offered—and his heart skipped a beat. "What about him?"

"My given name. You see, my mother...." He shrugged, shouldn't speak poorly of his father's widow. "Bless her pea picking heart, the woman loved the last good emperor of Rome."

"Marcus Ford." She smiled again, even bigger that time. "Rebecca Baylor Buckmeyer Rusk. Pleased to meet you, sir."

"I prefer Major, if you don't mind."

"But why, pray tell? There's not a thing wrong with Marcus, or even Mark. It's a strong, disciple's name. Though I can understand steering clear of that middle moniker." She smiled again, and he practically swooned. My, the affect the beautiful lady had on him proved quite surprising. If he didn't know better, he'd think himself smitten.

The desire to tell her his life grew with each breath, but he

decided it best to keep his tongue. “Long story. Perhaps when you’re grown, I’ll enlighten you.”

Ah. She snickered, and he loved it. “You, sir, are nothing more than a flirt. Or either blind. My youth has long since faded.”

His lips curled into a smirk, almost the same one he hated on his sister’s mug, but the practiced expression had served him well. “You must have married very young, my lady. I doubt you’ve seen twenty and five winters in your short and obviously protected life.”

The flush of her cheeks rewarded his little truth stretching. He pegged her age somewhere close to his own, but what lady didn’t enjoy being mistaken as younger? Her appearance... Suffice it to say that the classic beauty far outshined any he’d laid eyes upon before. And that included his dear Julia.

“Um hum.” She worked at cutting the coat’s second shoulder seam, and didn’t look up. “You do know, Major, that lying will send you to hell same as stealing.”

“Methodist?”

That won him a glance. Her eyes sparkled so. “Yes, as a matter of fact. And you, Marcus? What is your faith?”

That time, he would not lie. “There’s a God out there somewhere, ma’am. I’m convinced of that fact. But to my way of thinking, He doesn’t reside in any church building of which I’ve darkened the door.”

She nodded. Her lips thinned into to contemplation as she returned to her alterations, expertly threading a needle.

For a mile or better, she remained silent, and sewed, then looked up. “I’m on my way to San Francisco and should be away less than a year. If perchance, you find yourself in Texas again, I would love taking you to one of our meetings. The Lord is definitely there. Of that, I am convinced.”

The stories Wallace told were true. His widow was all he’d said and more.

“Perhaps, I’ll make a point of that. Least I could do to repay you for altering my suit.” He grinned. “And should He show, I’ve actually got a list of questions I like to ask the man upstairs.”

Hope you’ll all enjoy **At Liberty to Love**
coming soon...in 2016!

Reach out to the author...

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Praying my story gives God glory!□
Blessings, Caryl

Author reaching out to you!

Hey dear Reader!

Where would I be if not for you? I always pray my story gives God glory and hope you enjoyed it. My desire is that it brought you closer to Him and gave you issues to ponder, asking for God's perspective.

If you'd like to stay right on top of all my book news, I'd love you to subscribe to my email newsletter The Caryler which arrives

quarterly to your Inbox. I try to make it fun with a Scripture of the day and a lyric of the day.

You see, God gives me new songs, and there's nothing I'd rather do than praise and worship Him in song! That may lend to me being called the Singing Pray-er. I sing my prayers, too.

I include a few of my favorite things in it, too. My husband, being my favorite man, has a little corner and shares a few of his thoughts. I include other Christian authors and bloggers, sometimes a movie or book review, or a song.

It tells you what I'm working on, what's finished and what's coming out soon, and sales coming up on different titles. And as my thank you, I'll give away one eBook each quarter! Sign up at my website www.CarylMcAdoo.com in the right column on my Home page.

I hope if you like my story, you'll take the time to review it at Amazon, Goodreads, your blog, and any where you enjoy reading about books. And click "follow" under my picture while you're there. □ Of course, tell your friends, too.

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Love in Christ and many blessings,

Caryl

A few links Others might find helpful:



Needing any help with your online presence? Go to [Rocksteady Resolutions](#) for help with websites, email lists, and all social media outlets. CEO Janis McAdoo (yes, my daughter-in-love) will be the best virtual assistant you could ever have. She is knowledgeable, energetic, full to the brim of integrity, and I promise, will be a God-sent blessing to you!

Three Facebook groups:

[Christian Indie Books](#) is a great place to find great books from new

authors who post new releases, special sales, and sometimes, even free books!

[Christian Indie Authors Readers Group](#) is a great place to visit to meet new authors who post deals and often even free books!

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Blogs:

[India's Crown in Christian Literature Excellence](#) INDIA'S CROWN'S objective is to join Christian American authors with like-minded readers from India. Premier resource for Christian literature across both continents. A book awarded FREE each week from the guest author.

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